



A Devious Descent (The Deviants #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When light fades and shadows play, the realm eater comes to take you away.

Frankie Hart thought she was as human as they come—until her brother vanishes, and she unravels a truth that shatters her world. Not only is she half-demon, but she is also the key to a prophecy that could either save or obliterate the human realm.

Zarreth, a demon from the Dark Realm, takes it upon himself to hunt Frankie and prevent the prophecy from unfolding. However, the longer he watches her, the more he becomes drawn to her in ways he can't understand. His obsession grows when Frankie's search comes to a dead-end, and she turns to Zarreth for help. Could she be his fated mate?

Together, Frankie and Zarreth must navigate a world where allegiances shift, and enemies lurk at every corner. Will Frankie succumb to the darkness inside her and become the instrument of destruction foretold? Or will their bond be enough to keep the darkness at bay?

Total Pages (Source): 40

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200 years prior

“Please stop! I don’t know anything.” Beads of sweat roll down the seer’s forehead, dripping into his eyes. It stings, but there is nothing he can do about it. He can’t move. He can’t even blink.

Struggling, he tries turning his head to the side, desperate to put some space between the sharp tip of the blade and his pupil. Gritting his teeth, he wills his fingers to open and release the dagger, but it’s no use. He is no match for Aradon’s mind control.

“Don’t lie to me, Seer,” Aradon warns. Waving his hand, he forces the seer to plunge the blade deep into his eye.

“No! No!” His screams drown out the sickening sound of his eyeball turning to liquid. “Desfara is coming,” he cries out. “Desfara is coming!”

Aradon gasps. His knees weaken, threatening to buckle, but he manages to keep himself upright.

“Desfara? The Realm Eater?” His voice shakes. “That is but a farce. A tale told to young demons to make them behave.”

Aradon waves a trembling hand, allowing the seer to open his fingers. The dagger falls to the cement floor with a clatter.

Finally able to control his hands, the seer presses his palms to his mutilated eye socket to stop the bleeding. Rocking his body back and forth, he cries, “The prophecy

is true, my lord.”

Aradon picks up the dagger and wipes the blood on his sleeve. “Tell me everything you know about the prophecy, and I will consider sparing your life.”

Through labored breaths and shallow gasps, the seer speaks. “In the 21st century, a being, neither fully human nor demon, will be born with powers so great even the elders will bow in reverence. Possessing both light and darkness, healing or destroying with but a thought, the fate of the realms lies in their hands. Only through suffering will their true path be revealed. Either chaos and ruin will descend upon us, or we will be spared by the light that saves us all.”

A wicked smile crosses Aradon’s face before morphing into a manic laugh. His sinister plan forms in the seer's mind, sending a fresh wave of panic down his spine. “Please, Lord Aradon, don’t do what you’re thinking,” the seer pleads between sobs. “The realms, as we know them, will be forever changed.”

“Precisely,” Aradon says, handing the blade back to the seer. “Now cut off your head.”

Aradon strolls from the cell, an evil grin glued to his face. He traces away, leaving nothing behind but a cloud of black smoke and the echo of screams bouncing off the stone prison walls.

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Frankie

“N athaniel! Turn that shit off!” Throwing on my old ratty robe, I stomp to my brother’s bedroom and pound on the door. I have half an hour before I need to get ready for work, and I fully intend on spending that time dreaming of Bradley Cooper.

“I’m serious, Nate! I will shove that stupid alarm clock up your ass if you don’t turn it off!” It’s probably hard to take my threat seriously when I say it through a yawn, but his alarm has been blaring for thirty minutes already, and I’m tempted to make good on it. He might be my only family and my most favorite person in the world, but I really want to throat-punch him right now.

I knock again. Nothing. Guess I’m going in.

With shielded eyes, I burst through his door, preparing for anything I might interrupt. Last time I entered his bedroom uninvited, I found him licking whipped cream off some girl’s boobs whose name I’m sure he didn’t know. Nate looked up just as I tried making my escape. All I saw was a beard full of cool whip, making him resemble a perverted mall Santa. It almost would’ve been funny if he wasn’t my brother.

Uncovering my eyes, I get ready to make a smartass remark but stand gaping when I realize I’m alone. Nate must’ve gone to work early and forgot to turn off his alarm. Why doesn’t he just use the one on his phone like everyone else?

Reaching for his alarm clock, I knock over one of the half empty Busch Light cans littering his nightstand. Stale beer spills over the cheap laminate surface.

“Shit!” I sigh, rushing to grab the stack of rolling papers before they get soaked, quickly shoving them in my pocket. I clean up the mess, noticing a generous amount of used paper towels by his bed. “Ugh, gross!” I mumble, pretending not to know what he used them for as I put an end to the incessant blaring of his alarm.

Shuffling across the hall, I return to my bedroom and set the rolling papers next to the jar of green buds on my bookshelf. Dino stares at me with one eye as I crawl back into bed. His other one popped off years ago. The pink, matted dinosaur has gotten me through some tough times as a kid. Pulling him close to my chest, I burrow underneath my sage green comforter.

I try conjuring the image of Bradley Cooper, naked, confessing his love for me, but it’s useless after discovering Nate’s nasty cum rags. Thanks a lot, Nate, wherever you are.

Instead, I study the Devils Ivy hanging from the ceiling, trailing down both sides of my bed. The leaves are starting to droop a little, the edges slightly curling. I guess I should get up and water them. Throwing off my covers, I decide to bid farewell to Brad and start my day.

I load a variety of starter plants into the back of an old pickup truck before turning to Ms. Anderson. “Remember to plant these deep so you get more roots. Your tomatoes will thank you.”

She smiles at me. “Thanks for the tip, kiddo. You really know your stuff.”

My cheeks heat from her praise as I slam her tailgate shut. Ms. Anderson waves at me before driving away, eager to plant her garden. Returning her wave, I leisurely stroll back to the greenhouse, enjoying the warm sun on my face.

Grass Roots Greenery is where I spend most of my time. I’ve worked here since I

was sixteen, picking up extra shifts every chance I get.

“That old bat get everything she was looking for?” Dave grunts. My grumpy old boss scares away all the customers with his sunshiny disposition. The man doesn’t have the patience to explain the difference between heirloom plants and hybrid ones. I don’t know why he thought working with the public was a good choice for him.

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Ms. Anderson got everything she was looking for. You really should start being nicer to the customers, Dave.”

“That’s your job,” he grumbles, walking back to his office. “And stay off the phone Frankie! I mean it.” I swear a smile pulls at his lips as he slams the door.

Walking to the back of the greenhouse to take inventory, I grab a rubber band off the bench, braiding my hair as I go to keep it off my sweaty neck. Just as I finish, my phone rings making me jump.

Ripping it from my back pocket, I quickly silence it before Dave hears. He wasn’t kidding when he told me to stay off my phone. Making sure I’m completely hidden between the cucumbers and zucchini, I bring the phone to my ear.

Jess’ high-pitched squeal pierces my eardrums. “Frankieeeeeee! I’m so excited for tonight! What are you gonna wear?”

Jess has been my best friend since elementary school despite our different personalities. She thrives in social settings thanks to her bubbly, outgoing personality, whereas I would rather stay home in my pajamas and watch *Gilmore Girls* .

Before I can even give her an answer, she says, “Don’t you dare bail on me! We’re going to dress up and dance our asses off. You owe me.”

She's right. She didn't complain once during our Lord of the Rings marathon last weekend, even though she thought Gandalf and Saruman were the same person.

"I know, I know. Tonight will be fun. I was thinking of wearing a white tank top with those cute pants I bought last week." I know she won't let me get away without showing some skin, but I try anyway.

Jess huffs. "I knew you would say that. I'm grabbing some clothes that will show off your goods and will meet you at your house. Seriously, Frankie, what would you do without me?"

I open my mouth to give her a smartass reply when Dave's door bursts open. "Frankie, you better not be on the phone."

Shrinking farther between the carts I whisper yell, "Shit!"

Giggles come through the other end of the phone line. "I swear he's going to fire you someday."

Grabbing a cucumber, I wave it over my head like a white flag. "Nope, just taking inventory like you told me to," I yell in Dave's direction, before whispering into the phone. "I'll see you at my place."

"Have fun with the inventory," Jess says before hanging up.

Pocketing my phone, I look up to see Dave standing over me with his usual scowl. "Cucumber inventory?" He looks at me with an arched grey eyebrow.

"And Zucchini!" I defend, giving him a guilty smile.

Shaking his head, he turns back to his office. He really should fire me, but he won't

because the customers love me.

I stop at the liquor store on my way home before pulling my rusty 2002 Chevy Malibu into my driveway.

Jess is already at my house, carrying more clothes than I have in my entire closet. We met in the third grade when a group of boys were cornering me at school, teasing me for my dirty clothing and unkempt hair. I started having a panic attack, but Jess came to my rescue with a group of fifth graders. They swooped in and Jess whisked me away. When I asked her how she convinced the older boys to help, she just shrugged stating, “Anyone will help if you know how to ask.” We’ve been inseparable ever since.

“Can you grab the bag of shoes from my backseat?” she yells over her shoulder as I exit my car.

“You brought an entire bag of shoes for two people?” Chuckling, I grab the bag, Diet Coke, and Jack Daniels before following her into the old rambler Nate and I are renting.

It’s not much, but the owner gives us a discount in exchange for Nate doing repairs around the place. It’s surrounded by acres of trees and corn fields, so we have plenty of privacy. The small stream behind our house brings in all kinds of animals. Especially this time of year when the snow has melted, the trees are budding with new leaves, and my hostas serve as a delicious treat for the hungry deer and rabbits.

It’s significantly better than the house we grew up in. Actually, anything without a lock on the pantry door is better than the house we grew up in. I shudder thinking about all the times my mom locked me in that damn pantry. I’m thankful those times are behind me.

We spend the next hour getting ready with Olivia Rodrigo blaring in the background. Jess rolls over on my bed, groaning as I change for the third time. “Dude, you look hot. Stop being self-conscious.” That’s easy for her to say with her silky red hair and body that looks photoshopped.

“Are you sure it isn’t too short?” Being a couple inches taller than Jess makes her clothes look extra scandalous on me. I stare in the mirror, tugging the bottom of the dress down, only to make my cleavage more pronounced. Damn it!

“Hell no,” Jess says, mindlessly scrolling on her phone. “Show off those sexy legs.”

She’s wearing a black sheer top over a black bra and matching miniskirt. Reaching into her bag, she pulls out a pair of strappy heels before throwing them at my feet.

I glare at the torture devices, reaching for my old trusty converse instead. “I love you, friend, but not enough to sacrifice my toes all night.”

Jess shrugs her shoulders. “I figured I’d try,” she says before leaping off the bed. “I’m raiding Nate’s room. We need to do shots before our ride gets here.”

A minute later, she returns carrying two shot glasses. “Grandpa G needs water. He looks like shit.”

Grandpa G is a plant we stole from our grandpa’s funeral. I was too busy this morning cleaning up spilled beer and trying to get back to Brad, so I didn’t notice he had been neglected.

“Ugh, I told Nate I could take better care of that plant than he could, but he insisted on putting it in his bedroom. He said, and I quote ‘chicks dig plants.’ I’m gonna be pissed if Grandpa G dies because Nate needs help getting laid.”

Jess applies another layer of mascara. “Where is Nate anyway? I thought he was coming out with us tonight.”

I look in the mirror and shrug. This is as good as I’m gonna get. “He wasn’t home this morning when I woke up, but I’m sure he’ll be there.”

I send Nate another text message before Jess and I down our shots.?

Where the hell are you? Are you coming out tonight?

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Zarreth

I peer through the glass patio door, watching the most beautiful woman in fucking existence throw back a shot of liquor.

She laughs, wiping drops of liquid from her plump lips. Dark curls cascade around her bare shoulders like a waterfall in a haunted forest; a forest I would gladly rip apart for the chance to peer into her emerald-green eyes.

“Dumbass,” scoffing to myself, I shake the thoughts from my head remembering why I’m here. She may be hot as hell, but Frankie Hart needs to die.

I envision wrapping my fingers around her pretty neck. I bet just one of my hands could fit around it, snapping it like a twig. She’s weak right now, not expecting it. I could lure her away, shove her against a tree, seeing how wet she is under that sorry excuse for a dress.

FUUUUCK, no! Stay focused Zarreth. I’ll make it quick. Snap her neck, then take care of the redhead too. But that might raise too many questions. I need to be patient and wait until she’s alone.

I pull the hood of my sweatshirt over my head, forgetting I no longer need to hide my horns now that they’re gone. Frankie tugs at the bottom of a dress barely covering her ass. Damn she has nice legs, long and smooth. My cock throbs envisioning those legs wrapped around my waist.

Snapping myself from a moment of temporary insanity, I step further into the

shadows, behind the tree line. A maroon SUV flies up the driveway, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. The horn blares before coming to a stop, mere inches from the front porch. A red-faced man with a thinning comb-over rolls down the window and yells, “Let’s go.”

Who the fuck is this guy?

“Calm your tits,” the red head yells as she and Frankie burst through the door. “We’re coming.”

“Jess! He’s just doing his job,” Frankie admonishes, giving the driver an apologetic look. “Sorry about my friend.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the driver says as his eyes roam over her body. “I’ve had worse passengers.”

Frankie tugs at her dress once more, smiling uncomfortably at him. Holding back a growl, I ponder the different ways I could separate his head from his body. He doesn’t deserve her looks, her smiles. They’re mine, and I plan to take them all.

The wind blows in my direction as Frankie crawls into the back seat. The intoxicating scent of sunshine and lavender invades my nostrils, the world around me fading into a blur.

Thump.

Thump.

My heart pounds under my ribcage as a rush of familiarity washes over me. Placing my hand to my chest, I try rubbing out the slight ache lingering there as they drive away. What the fuck was that? Why am I having such a strong reaction to her?

I figured she would smell like death and darkness. Someone who smells like heaven couldn't possibly be the Realm Eater, could they?

Focus, Zarreth. Emerging from the shadows, I make my way to her house and climb the steps to her porch. They squeak and strain under my weight as I grip the doorknob, easily turning it in my hands.

Why the fuck isn't her door locked? It fucking irritates me. It's like she's begging for something violent to happen to her.

I step over the threshold to an open floor plan, directly entering the living room. I'm greeted by a poster of a meditating frog with the caption Try not to be a dick . Ha, the girl has a sense of humor.

Blankets and pillows drape the couch, and a pile of books rests on the coffee table. The only thing separating the kitchen and the living room is a small island with two barstools next to it.

I look through her house, trying to find anything that screams Realm Eater, but find nothing, unless Realm Eaters sleep with pink stuffed dinosaurs. I bring the dinosaur to my nose and inhale deeply. It smells like her, pleasant and calming.

The idea of killing her isn't sitting well with me. I've killed a lot throughout the years, but never a female. It's hard to believe someone who seems so harmless could be responsible for obliterating entire realms. Maybe I'll watch her for a few days to be sure she's the danger we think she is.

I head back to the old, abandoned barn across the road from Frankie's house. It's less than extravagant, but it's far better than the dark, musty cell I lived in for the past twenty years. We chose it because it's close to Frankie, and no one will suspect we're staying here.

Someone must have lived here at some point because two of the stalls have ratty, stained mattresses on the ground. The inch of dust on the old wooden table tells us whoever it was hasn't been here for a while.

Ronin bitches at me the moment I walk through the door. I don't have to say anything for him to know I let Frankie live.

"What the fuck man? Twenty years in captivity made you soft." He leans back in a metal chair, balancing on its two rear legs. "I thought you were chosen to lead The Recreants during the rebellion because of your big, bad reputation."

Ronin and I are from the Realm of Darkened Depths. There are only two demon hordes there, the Death Horde and The Recreants.

Aradon, one of the oldest demons in existence, is the overlord of the Death Horde. He controls two of the three bodies of water, leaving most demons no choice but to bow down to him.

Thankfully, the third body of water is in The Recreants' village. If we didn't have access to it, our horde would have been forced to join the Death Horde along with the others. But that didn't stop Aradon from terrorizing us, raiding our village once a month.

When I was ten years old, my dad went hunting with a group of demons. I begged him to let me come, telling him I would be a better warrior if I did. He reassured me I had the most important job of staying back to protect my mother.

"Mother doesn't need my protection! She's fierce!"

"Even the fiercest of warriors need someone by their side."

That night, Ronin and I learned a lesson we'll never forget. While we were playing outside, our mothers were preparing dinner. An eerie silence overcame our minds, as if they were taken over by shadows. I didn't know what terror was until that night when we were forced to watch our mothers being raped by members of the Death Horde. We sat there, utterly helpless, unable to look away as we fought against the shadows claiming our minds. That was the first time I felt Aradon's dark magic in my head. It was definitely not the last.

Ronin and I vowed to never let something like that happen again. We started practicing with a sword after that. Every day, we would train until our hands were bloody and callused, making sure we were as strong as possible before the change was complete. I completed the change, maturing into my powers first. Stronger and faster than most, I was chosen to lead an army. Ronin completed his change a year later and became my second in command.

It took years to build an army big enough, but we finally decided to rebel. We couldn't keep living in constant fear. The battle turned into a war that lasted years. Severely outnumbered, on the brink of losing our horde, Aradon offered to let them live in peace if Ronin, three other demons, and I submitted to him.

It was an easy choice for me. I was done watching my horde suffer. Their safety was worth my life. Aradon took us prisoner, and that's where we've been for the past two decades.

Ronin has a right to be pissed—we need to get back to our horde—but I'm still tempted to kick out the legs of his chair and send him crashing to the ground. Leading our small horde into battle and killing a puny halfling with a great smile are two very different things.

I turn the other rusty chair around and sit backwards; a habit I evidently still have, even though my wings are gone. "We need more time."

“We don’t have time,” Ronin reminds me. “We need to kill her before Aradon finds her so we can finally go home.”

I know he’s right, but still I say, “What if the prophecy is wrong? What if she’s not what we think she is?” I don’t know why I’m hesitant. She may not be evil now, but she will be after she completes the change.

Ronin taps his thumbs against the front of the small rectangular contraption he’s holding. “We can’t take the chance. Think of the things Aradon could force someone with her powers to do. She needs to die.”

He slides the contraption across the table to me. I pick it up and turn it over in my hands, studying it.

“I know. I’ll take care of her.” I hold up the contraption, changing the subject. “What is this?”

“That is your new best friend,” Ronin says. “It’s called a cell phone. Think of it as sending a letter to someone, only faster. They don’t work in the Dark Realm, but it will come in handy while we’re here.”

Ronin knows a lot about human technology and culture. Many older demons can trace within a realm simply by imagining a place they have already been, but only few have a traveler’s mark, allowing them to trace between realms. As a shadow demon, Ronin was born with one, so he’s been to the Human Realm many times over the years.

I focus on Ronin’s explanation of how to use the phone. We don’t plan to be in the Human Realm long, but I can see how the little tool will be useful.

Once Ronin is confident I can use the cell phone, he stands, pulls a flask from his

pocket, and hands it to me. “This will help with your wounds.” He nods to a bag sitting in the corner. “The clothes in that bag will help you blend in. Get some rest. I’ll be back to check on you.”

Before I can respond, he disappears, leaving behind a cloud of white smoke. Gods, I miss tracing. I can’t wait for my powers to come back.

I take a swig from the flask. How the hell did he get demon brew?

Shadow demons are known for having all sorts of connections and for being notoriously crafty. That’s why they make excellent spies. Ronin was one of the best spies in the Dark Realm; before we got captured anyway.

Looking over my shoulder to where my wings should be, I twist the top off the demon brew and dump it over my back. It stings, but it should prevent infections.

Normally demons don’t worry about infection because of our ability to heal rapidly, but after everything Aradon did to me, it will take time for all my abilities to return.

I turn my attention to the stab wound on my stomach. It’s bright red, seeping pus. A scab has formed, so I sterilize my knife, hissing while I reopen the cut. Cleaning it the best I can, I squeeze out the infection before applying a bandage.

My other wounds have already begun healing. If I sleep tonight, they should all be completely closed by tomorrow. Of course, that will have to wait because I have a little halfling to watch.

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Frankie

The Lost Cause Tavern is a small hidden treasure. During the week, it's home to farmers, construction workers, and anyone who is too tired to cook but still wants a home-cooked meal.

Butch owns the place, but he refuses to hire a cook, so he makes everything himself. The menu is small, but the food is fantastic.

We walk through the door and push our way to the bar. A couple guys we went to high school with are arguing over a pool game. One of them stops mid-sentence and calls out to Jess. "Hey Jess, I'm still waiting for that date you promised me."

"I didn't promise you anything, Tyler," Jess says as she leans over the bar, grabbing an olive and popping it in her mouth.

Tyler turns his attention to me. "Can't you talk to her for me, Frankie?" he pleads, making prayer hands and giving me puppy dog eyes.

I shake my head. "You're a persistent one Tyler, I'll give you that."

Mandy, the bartender, has already started mixing our drinks. "Two whiskey cokes for two pretty ladies," she says, handing them to us, along with two shots of fireball.

"Bottoms up, bitch!" Jess exclaims as we clink our glasses together before downing our shots.

Even though we live in a town too small for a stoplight, the population nearly doubles on the weekends. Especially in the warmer months. Many people from larger cities have cabins here because of all the lakes, and over the years they discovered this tiny piece of heaven.

Butch brought a band in tonight, so it's even more packed than usual. Most of the bands who play here are made up of retired men living out their dreams, but tonight the stage is graced with the Walmart version of Maroon 5. They don't sound too bad and a couple of them are kinda cute.

We head to the dance floor with our drinks and Jess playfully dances in front of the guitar player, flashing him a killer smile. "I'm setting the bait," she says to me as the guitar player winks at her. She's like the emo version of Jessica Rabbit.

Chuckling to myself, I close my eyes and sway my hips to the beat, letting the music take me away. Music has always been like therapy to me. Jess' parents bought me an iPod when I was younger. I would sit at her computer for hours downloading music on it. It helped me block out the fighting at home, making life a little more bearable.

Jess grabs my hand as we sing obnoxiously to the music, which is thankfully loud because we sound like a herd of dying cows. I was hoping Nate would've shown up by now. "I'm gonna call my brother," I yell over the music.

"Sounds good. I'm gonna go say hi to Tyler," Jess yells back before heading toward the pool tables. Poor guy. She's just using him to make the guitar player jealous.

I step outside to call Nate. I can't believe I haven't heard from him yet. He usually checks in with me if he's not going to be home. The phone goes to voicemail. "Hey shithead! I don't care if your balls deep in some blonde bimbo, you need to get your ass to the tavern. They have a decent band playing tonight."

I follow the message up with a text.

Seriously, Nate! Where the hell are you?

I imagine him laying in a ditch somewhere before quickly scolding myself. It's only been a day, I'm sure he's fine. Although he could at least call me back. Jerk!

I growl in frustration as I close my eyes, resting the back of my head against the side of the building. Where the hell could he be?

A deep voice makes me jump, nearly sending my heart into my throat. It's the kind of voice that makes your toes curl. The kind that would have you on your knees with just a few words. "You better be careful, little one. That big growl of yours might scare everyone off."

My eyes fly open. A man who is at least a foot and a half taller than I am stands in front of me. The moon illuminates his face just enough to reveal his strong jaw and devilish smirk. The hood of his black sweatshirt is pulled up, making it difficult to see much else.

But it doesn't matter. I highly doubt I could focus on anything other than the amber eyes currently burning into mine. I swear the flames in his eyes briefly turn black before turning amber again. Even the shadows can't hide their intensity and danger lurking within.

"S...Sorry," I stutter. "I thought I was alone."

The man steps closer to me, placing a hand on the brick wall beside my head. The heat radiating off his body ignites a fire in mine, burning me up from the inside out. His scent carries a hint of charred wood, like a campfire that had burned down to the coals. His eyes trail over every inch of me, leisurely taking in my bare legs, the crease

between my breasts, my neck. He stops when he reaches my mouth as I instinctively wet my lips. Darkness spreads from his pupils, turning his eyes black, like he's possessed. Damn, this man is so hot I'm starting to see things.

I'm painfully aware of how revealing this stupid skin-tight dress is, knowing the french-fries and cheeseburger I ate earlier are showing. Normally I don't care about that; I think soft, little tummies are cute, but the way this man is staring at me is making me suddenly self-conscious.

His eyes return to their amber glow as he brings them up to meet mine. "We are alone," he purrs.

I blink. My God. Is it possible to have an orgasm from one look? I feel my insides tighten as I rub my thighs together. Why is this incredibly attractive man talking to me in the first place? I'm sure he can have anyone he wants.

I continue staring into his eyes, mesmerized. I try to think of something clever to say, but of course I have no luck. The only thing leaving my mouth is a pathetic little squeak.

The corner of his lips pulls up in amusement as he brings them to my ear. I nearly moan as his breath sweeps across my skin, sending goosebumps over my body. His presence reminds me of a wolf sizing up his next meal as I arch my neck, giving him full access.

What is wrong with me?

The growl I'm met with is deadly. "You should get inside. It's dangerous out here."

He steps back, breaking the connection. I blink rapidly, stealing my spine as shivers run down it like a thousand spiders skittering across my skin. I quickly turn, thankful

I'm wearing my converse and not the shoes Jess suggested. With my luck, I'd fall flat on my face with those heels on.

I will my legs to walk calmly and not sprint to the door like the chickenshit I am. I'm determined not to let the sexy stranger see me this nervous or aroused.

Once inside, I lean against the door, now feeling cold without his burning presence. My adrenaline fades, letting me breathe easier as I wonder what he was doing in the alley. He doesn't seem like the small-town bar type.

Jess is still talking to Tyler, so I stop by the bar and order two more whiskey cokes. The front door bangs open, and I look over, hoping the man from outside followed me in.

No luck. It's just a cute couple holding hands and making me want to puke. I don't know why I want to see him anyway. He has trouble written all over him.

"Frankie!" Mandy says, pulling me back to reality.

I grab the drinks from her hand. "Thanks, girl. Can you put them on my tab?"

She points to the two guys near the end of the bar. "Too late, the Chads already took care of it." I smile to myself. We have code names for the out-of-towners. If she names them Chad, it means they're harmless, but man children.

"I guess I should go thank them," I say, but change my mind when one bites his lower lip, looking at me like I'm a snack. "Gross," I scoff, looking back at Mandy who looks like she has the heebie jeebies just as much as I do.

I decide to simply nod my head in their direction, forcing a polite smile. The other Chad makes a V-shape with his fingers and sticks his tongue between them, earning a

high-five from his friend.

I pretend to gag as Mandy gives them a dirty look. “Gross is an understatement,” she says. “I’ll be sure to ward them off.”

The band announces they’re taking a break, so I sit at an empty table near the dance floor. I should say hi to Tyler and his friends, but I hate small talk. Jess sees me anyway and comes over. I’m about to tell her about the guy in the alley when the hot guitar player and the drummer take a seat next to us.

The guitarist takes Jess’ hand in a gentle handshake as they start an awkward conversation.

“Brent,” the guitarist says.

“Jessica,” Jess coos in a breathy, sexy voice.

“Single?”

“For now.”

“Interested?”

“Maybe. You?”

“Very.”

I look at the drummer; he doesn’t have the dangerous allure of the amber-eyed stranger, but he’s kinda charming. “Does your friend have more than four words in his vocabulary? Because apparently mine forgot how to string sentences together.”

The drummer, whose name turns out to be Micah, laughs. “Words are hard for him, but I think he might be up to ten now.”

Brent chuckles and slugs Micah in the shoulder. We continue chatting until the break is over and the band goes on stage to play their second half of their set. Jess fills me in on an after party they invited us to. I sigh internally as I realize it’s going to be a long night. My introverted self will definitely need to sleep for days after this.

We finish our drinks and head back to the dance floor. I catch myself looking at the door often, hoping my stranger will return. I’m sure he’s off scaring unsuspecting victims with his deep, manly voice.

I replay that sexy deep voice in my head as I dance to the music, minding my own business, when I feel someone’s junk press into my tailbone. I turn around, taking a step back. You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. “I hope you enjoyed that, because that’s the closest you will get to getting lucky tonight.” I internally cringe, apologizing to my poor ass for letting Chad touch it.

Why do guys think dancing means humping like an adolescent dog who isn’t neutered? I’ve given no signals indicating I’m interested in being humped.

He must realize what a douchebag he looks like because he opens his eyes and says, “What’s wrong baby? Don’t you want to dance with the Champ?”

I make a point to look around the bar for someone worthy of the title. “Sure. Where’s the Champ?”

Chad opens his arms wide before slapping his chest like he’s Tarzan. “You’re looking at him.”

I hold back a laugh. He actually believes himself. Chad really doesn’t know how to

read a room. “I’m not interested.”

“Sure you are, baby. You just need a little convincing.” He places his hands on my hips.

“Get your hands off me!” I try backing up, but the douchebag tightens his grip and pulls me against him. He smells nothing like my stranger. Instead of burning coal, it’s axe body spray and body odor. I press my hands to his chest and push, trying to get away. “I’m serious. Back the fuck up.”

Instead, he grinds his pencil dick into the front of me. “You like it rough, baby? I could make you feel so good,” he says before licking me like a goddam dog. The asshole LICKED ME! So much for warding them off, Mandy.

“No means no, asshole!” I try bracing my feet, pushing with all my might, but he doesn’t budge. Little white spots float in my vision, blurring the scene around me. What’s happening? Is this what fainting feels like? I swear to God, if I pass out in Chad’s smelly arms I’m gonna be pissed. I finally glance up to see blood oozing from his eyes, his face twisted in agony.

“Your eyes,” he whispers. With a stunned look on his face, Chad grabs his head and turns around.

Why did he say your eyes? He’s the one who should be worried about his eyes. People gasp, scrambling out of the way as Chad stumbles off the dance floor.

“Dude, you’re bleeding,” someone says.

I hardly notice Chad Number Two flipping me off before following his friend to the bathroom. My whole body feels numb. Shivering, I try pushing down the rising panic. Did I cause the bleeding? If so, how? All I did was push him back. And why

do my hands feel like they fell asleep? I shake them, trying to get the weird, buzzing feeling to leave.

Jess comes up, wrapping her arms around me. “Are you okay?” When she pulls away, her eyes go wide as they meet mine. “Woah, your eyes are like super green.”

“My eyes?” Her concern over my eyes confuses me because Chad’s eyes were literally bleeding. “Did you see his eyes?” My voice trembles as I try processing what just happened.

Jess puts her hands on her hips. “That guy is an asshole. Who knows what he does to girls who are too drunk to say no. He deserves to have his eyes clawed out.”

“I didn’t go near his face, though.” I shake my head. “I just pushed him off me. I don’t know what the hell happened to his eyes.”

Jess adjusts her nose ring. “Maybe he’s on drugs.”

“Maybe.” I don’t believe it though. Could a person really bleed from their eyes because of a drug?

Jess’ face falls a little. “Do you want to leave? We can go,” she says, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice.

No way am I leaving. Jess deserves a night out. She’s been working so hard lately. “Hell no! I’m not letting that d-bag ruin our night.”

Jess squeals in delight as I turn around, marching back to the bar. “Where’re you going?” she yells, following my path through the crowd.

Before I even reach the bar, Mandy gives me a sympathetic look. “I already told

Butch. He said he'll throw them out as soon as they get out of the bathroom."

Sometimes I really love living in a small town. The locals always look out for each other. "Thanks, girl! I owe you one."

The night continues without a hitch. By the time last call comes around, I forget all about the Chads.

We order one last round of shots. Brent leans into the microphone, giving us a shout out before downing his whiskey. Micah holds the glass up and winks at me before slamming his.

Twenty minutes later, we're standing outside The Tavern.

"So ladies, what's there to do around here?" Brent casually slings his arm around Jess' shoulder.

"I thought we were going to an after party," Jess says.

"Sounds like the dude Frankie beat up might be at the party, so we figured you guys would want to do something else." Micah smiles, brushing my shoulder with his.

I roll my eyes. "I didn't beat anyone up." I'm still a little creeped out, so I'm thankful they want to ditch the party. Coming up with an idea, I add. "But I know the perfect spot."

Jess knows exactly what I'm thinking, and a big smile spreads across her face. "It's unusually warm out tonight."

Fisherman's Bridge is only a half mile from The Tavern. The weather is perfect, and the fresh air feels amazing after dancing in a hot bar all night.

Brent gives Jess a piggyback ride as she giggles at something he said. Micah looks at them, then turns to me with an expectant look on his face like he wants me to hop on his back too. I glance away, pretending I didn't see the silent question in his eyes. Why am I so awkward?

"Here it is," I say as we come to stop, finally reaching our destination.

"Here what is?" Micah looks at the old wooden bridge, which looks as if it might collapse at any second.

"This is Fisherman's Bridge. We came here a lot in high school. If the water is cold, I'm sure we can find a way to warm up." I give Micah a flirty look, trying to make up for brushing him off earlier.

Micah must like that idea, because he lifts my chin and plants a kiss right on my lips before stripping down to his boxers. "Let's make some bad decisions." Laughing, he shoves Brent. The last thing we hear before they jump is their "whoop, whoop," followed by a satisfying splash.

Jess and I strip down to our bras and panties. "You ready?" Jess holds her hand out.

I take her hand in mine and smile. "Always," I say before we jump off the bridge, landing in the cold water.

Floating on my back, I look at the stars, thinking of my stranger in the bar. I squeeze my thighs together, remembering the way he looked at me and the rumble of his deep voice when he told me it was dangerous there.

Obviously, he's not from around here. The only danger in this town is getting stuck with the gross sprinkled donuts if you get to the gas station too late on a Sunday.

“Frankie! Get your ass up here,” Jess yells. I blink a few times realizing everyone else is already out of the water.

“Coming!” I swim to shore, shivering as I get out of the water. Jess is pulling Brent’s T-shirt over her head, as the boys work on starting a fire in the pit the locals dug in years ago.

“I didn’t know city boys knew how to make a fire. I’m impressed,” I tease, slipping on my dress, strategically removing my wet bra and underwear so I don’t flash anyone.

Micah grins, revealing perfectly straight white teeth, the kind you only get from braces. “I guess those summer camps my parents sent me to as a kid are finally coming in handy.”

“I guess they are.” He really is cute, and cute is exactly what I need. There is no reason for me to think about my sexy stranger. Cute is good; sexy is bad.

“Hell yeah,” Micah whoops as flames come to life. He sits back, looking proud of himself.

“Finally, I gotta take a leak.” Brent heads into the shadows.

Jess quickly jumps up. “I better go help him,” she exclaims. “Hopefully he needs help holding it up.”

I bust out laughing. I freaking love drunk Jess, even though she left me all alone to stare awkwardly at Micah.

“Sooo, how’s it going?” I try putting my hands in my pockets, only to remember I don’t have any.

Micah smirks. Grabbing my hand, he pulls me to the ground, so I'm sitting with my back to his chest. "I thought we could keep each other warm," he whispers in my ear before nibbling on it. I like the sound of that.

Micah slips his hand through the top of my dress and squeezes my breast. The warmth of his palms feels good against my cold, pebbled nipple. I reach both arms over my head, playfully pulling his hair, while arching my back, silently giving him permission to go further.

Micah uses his other hand to run his fingers up my leg before attempting to find my clit. Using the very tip of his index finger, he focuses on a spot about a centimeter away. "You like that?" he murmurs.

Do I like what? Having a fingertip size piece of flesh rubbed raw? I'm almost thankful he can't find my clit. I nod my head, not knowing what to say as I try nudging his hand in the right direction. I wish there was a class for those who don't own a clit explaining the chances of finding the little nub increase greatly if you use a larger surface area to find it.

I know I should just push his hand down, leaving him no choice but to use his palm, but I'm too embarrassed. Instead, I close my eyes, imagining his fingers belonging to the stranger with amber eyes. I rock my pelvis back and forth, pretending I'm pressed up against the side of a building, riding someone else's hand.

Just when he finds the magical bundle of nerves, he pulls away. What the hell? My eyes snap open as Micah groans, his hands holding both sides of his head.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

"No. My head might explode," he mumbles, rubbing his temples.

What? How is this happening for the second time? It has to be a coincidence. His eyes aren't bleeding. He probably gets headaches all the time.

"Hold on. I have some Advil." Blood rushes to my head when I stand up. I wobble slightly before steadying myself. Maybe that last shot was a bad idea.

I shake my hands, hoping to get the feeling back into them. With numb fingers, I manage to retrieve two tablets from my purse. Why are my hands feeling so weird tonight?

I hand the tablets to Micah. He swallows them without water, groaning as he lays back against a stump.

Jess and Brent stroll over, hand in hand. Jess has a doe-eyed look on her face, and I already know I'm going home alone.

"What's wrong with you, dude?" Brent asks Micah.

"I don't feel so hot. I think I'm getting a migraine."

Jess shuffles over to me, bumping her hip to mine with a wicked grin on her face. "Brent asked me to stay with him tonight. You should come with."

I'm not going to be a third wheel while Micah sleeps off his migraine. I yawn, stretching my arms overhead. "I'm tired, but you should still go. One of us might as well get laid tonight."

My bed sounds comfortable anyway, and I know B.O.B. (my battery-operated boyfriend) will be an excellent companion for the night.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

The smell of coffee pulls me from my sleep. Nate must be home. He doesn't drink coffee, but he likes to have it ready for me in the mornings. He says he's too scared to talk to me before I have my first cup, so it's actually self-serving, but appreciated, nonetheless.

I glance around my room, trying to remember how I got to bed last night. Where the hell is Dino? I always sleep with Dino. My grandpa gave him to me when I was a kid. We've been through a lot together, him and I. He's the only stuffed animal I've ever owned.

I look down to find I'm still wearing the green dress from last night. It's covered in dirt and smells like a bonfire. I wish I had at least taken it off before crawling under the blankets. I peek at myself in the mirror beside my bed. My hair looks like medusa and a rabid dog got into a fight. Most of my makeup came off in the water last night, so at least I don't also have raccoon eyes. All in all, I'm in decent shape considering the amount of whiskey I drank.

Memories of last night rush through my head. I can't believe I was thinking about my stranger when Micah was touching me. I must have it bad because I also dreamt someone with amber eyes was in my room, and that someone put Bradley Cooper to shame.

Dressing in sweatpants and an old Sublime t-shirt, I head to the kitchen to give Nate a piece of my mind. "You better have a seriously good explanation for not getting back to me last night," I scold, rounding the corner to find Jess pouring coffee into a

rainbow mug.

“Still haven’t heard from Nate?” she asks, handing me the one shaped like a penis. She points to two ibuprofens and coconut water sitting on the counter. “You might want to take those.” Did I mention how much I love my best friend?

Taking the mug from Jess, I blow gently on the hot coffee, sending warm steam swirling around my face. “No! I was hoping it was him in the kitchen making all this noise.”

“Nope! Just me. The most awesome person you know.” She hops on the counter, careful not to spill her coffee. Her hair is braided, and she’s wearing joggers, crocs, and a tank top that might be a sports bra. It’s so unfair how she looks like she spent all night at the spa, and I look like I got hit by a semi-truck. God really does have favorites.

“I’m worried about him.” I grab a banana and a jar of peanut butter and hop on the island next to the counter Jess is on. We have a small dining table, but for some reason the counters beckon us, and this is where we usually eat or gossip.

“You know Nate. He probably fell in love again.”

She has a point. Nate gets all goofy when he meets a girl he likes. “You’re probably right.” Needing to focus on something else for a bit, I change the subject. “Tell me about last night,” I smirk.

Jess fake swoons before taking a sip of coffee. “Oh my God! Brent is the sweetest guy. He made me breakfast this morning and asked to see me again tonight.”

“Hell yeah!” I squeal. I’m so happy for her. She deserves a good guy. “How’s Micah? I hope he’s feeling better.”

Jess shrugs. "Micah went straight to his room when we got to their place. He was still sleeping when I left this morning."

I rip off a chunk of banana and spread peanut butter on it before shoving it in my mouth. "It's weird he got sick so suddenly. He didn't drink much. Maybe I scared him away."

Jess gives me a serious look. "Did you happen to eat a banana in front of him? Because that might do it."

My laugh turns into a cough as I choke on the gooey, delicious concoction in my mouth. I manage to swallow it before saying, "It's for the best anyway. I don't want to get involved with anyone." At least I got to avoid the walk of shame this morning.

"You never get involved with anyone. It's been years since your last relationship," Jess points out while pouring herself another cup of coffee.

"B.O.B and I are doing all right." I chuckle, giving her a wink.

She's right though. I barely remember the last time I even went on a date. It's not like I haven't had the opportunity. I think I'm just too picky.

The sun is shining through the window, so I jump off the counter. "It's too nice outside to be in here."

Jess gives me a knowing smile. "I'll grab the blankets," she says as we make our way to our favorite spot, the porch swing out back.

"I really love it out here," I say as Jess tosses the blankets on my lap before scooting in and laying her head on my shoulder.

Sighing, I send my brother another text message.

Jess squeezes my arm, reassuring me. “Maybe Nate went to Isaac’s house for the weekend.”

Isaac is Nate’s best friend. He throws big parties every weekend, so there’s a good chance he’s there. “Maybe. I just wish he would call me back.”

“I guarantee he’s not thinking about his sister if he’s hooking up with someone at Isaac’s house. He’ll be home before work on Monday.”

She has a point. Relief washes over me. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“I know,” she says, shrugging one shoulder. “Now swing with me and listen to the birds sing.”

Monday morning arrives, and there is still no sign of Nate. I call his boss, but he hasn’t seen my brother either. Shit!

I then call my boss. Holding my breath, I wait for him to pick up as the phone rings. “Please tell me you’re not calling out sick,” Dave says the moment he answers.

“I’m not sick, but I can’t come in. Nate’s missing and I’m worried.”

He sighs, heavily. Before he has time to object, I start rubbing my finger back and forth over the speaker. “What? I can’t hear you. My phone’s breaking up.”

I’m pretty sure I hear him yelling as I disconnect, but I need to find my brother. He’ll understand. He secretly likes me.

The knots that have been in my stomach since Friday tighten further. Nate never

misses work, not even for a girl. Damnit, Nate! I slam my hand on the counter as panic rises. Where the hell could he be?

I search his room for the hundredth time. I look behind the guitar leaning against the wall, search through dresser drawers, and check the pockets of every pair of jeans I can find. Nothing.

Falling back onto his bed, I notice a thin layer of ash over his comforter. Where the hell did this come from? Maybe it's a clue, but what could it mean? And how did it get here? I sit up, brushing myself off and call him again.

Don't worry...about a thing...cause every little thing is gonna be alright.

What? The song we listened to on repeat as kids blares from under his bed. I get down on all fours, reaching under it until I feel his phone.

My heart plummets as I see the word *sis* light up the screen. I stare at it, dumbfounded, dread knotting in my stomach. Something's wrong. Nate would never leave the house for this long without his phone. Something bad had to have happened to him, I realize as panic claws at my throat. My mind spins thinking of what to do next. I need to find him. Oh my God! What if it's too late. What if he's...No! I won't let myself think that. Take a breath, Frankie. He's not dead. I refuse to believe that.

My hands tremble as I enter his password, bypassing the twenty-five messages I sent him. I find a photo of a half-naked brunette from an unknown number. Bingo!

I call the number, fingers crossed Nate's with her. After one ring I hear, "I send you a naked photo, and you wait an entire week to get back to me!"

I pull the phone away, hoping to save my eardrums. "Um... Hello?"

Before I explain who I am, she yells. “Who the hell is this? Actually, I don’t care. I don’t have time for Nate’s bullshit. Tell him we’re over. You can have him.” She disconnects. It’s not worth calling her back because it’s obvious she has no clue where Nate is.

I find Isaac’s number and give him a call. There’s no answer, so I text him on my own phone, asking if he’s seen Nate. I’m too antsy to wait for a response, so I decide to drive to his house.

Halfway there, Isaac calls, saying he hasn’t seen Nate since last weekend. There’s one more place to look. Tossing my phone into the passenger seat, I drive to our spot, speeding the entire way, hoping I don’t get pulled over.

I turn down an old dirt road and park my car. The path to Beauty Lake is overgrown, but the view is worth it if you can handle the mosquitoes and wood ticks.

Nate’s truck isn’t here, but I exit my car anyway wanting to clear my head before I report him missing to the police. I can’t help but search the surrounding area as I walk through the narrow, overgrown trail, scared I’ll find a body. Stop it, Frankie! He’s not dead.

Reaching the edge of the water, I sit on a tree stump, rubbing my thumb over the tire swing tattoo on my wrist. I stare up at the sky, remembering the times we spent out here.

We would pack PB he could definitely be the missing piece. Confident in my decision to go to the police, I buckle in, my engine roaring to life. I’ll be sure to mention this when I report Nate missing.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

I wanted to see her face when she saw her stuffed dinosaur in her front seat, but I didn't dare turn around.

She already saw my face at the bar the other night because I couldn't stay the fuck away from her. She looked so damn sexy in that little dress. I almost pinned her against the wall and fucked her until she screamed my name.

Pacing the barn back and forth, I tell myself I'm only watching her to make sure she's actually the threat we all perceive her to be. But, in reality, she has become my obsession. I want to consume every part of her. I want to pull her hair, exposing her throat so I can taste her. I bet she would be so responsive if I grazed my fangs against her sweet skin.

I shake my head, snarling. I need to quit being so fucking reckless and get this over with. The sooner she's dead, the sooner we can return to our horde.

Ronin walks in, one eyebrow raised in judgement. "You didn't do it, did you?"

I grit my teeth, shooting daggers at him. I don't owe him a fucking explanation.

He huffs. "I'll do it if you can't."

Before I realize what I'm doing, I grab him by the throat, pushing him against the wall. "You won't fucking touch her," I seethe. Adrenalin pumps through my veins at the thought of another male laying a finger on her.

Ronin pushes me off him, “What the fuck?”

I take a few steps back, interlacing my fingers behind my head, trying to slow my pulse. “Shit. I don’t know what the fuck is happening to me.”

“You got to get it together, man,” Ronin says.

“I know.”

“She has to die. Aradon can’t get his hands on her.” He reminds me for the tenth time, making my blood boil again.

“I know. I fucking know. I’ll do it tonight.”

“If you can’t do it...”

I cut Ronin off before he finishes his sentence. “I said I’ll fucking do it.”

I storm out of the barn and jump to the roof. I can do this. I’ve killed many beings in the six hundred years I have been alive. I can kill a half-pint, pipsqueak who has probably never even hurt a fucking fly in her entire life.

I watch Frankie from a distance. She’s perched on the porch swing with her bare legs tucked under her. I study the freckles scattered across her nose, the one curl swirling in the opposite direction of all the rest.

My skin grows hot, the fire inside me rising to the surface. I look down, noticing smoke emerging from under my fingertips. Jerking my hand away from the rooftop, I remind myself I need to be careful now that I don’t have those fucking binding cuffs on anymore.

If I could get my hands on a pair of those magical cuffs, maybe I wouldn't have to kill Frankie. The cuffs would suppress her powers, and she wouldn't be a threat.

I quickly disregard that thought. Ronin is right. We can't take the chance of Aradon finding her. It's too dangerous. She must die.

My mind wanders back to last night. Frankie was so inebriated, there is no way she remembered seeing me in her room. My skin buzzed with power simply by being next to her. She's definitely started the change already.

It was a struggle not to touch her, watching her chest rise and fall with each breath. Breath I should have taken from her. I could have ended her then and there. It wouldn't have been painful. I would have made it enjoyable.

But then she reached into the drawer of her nightstand, retrieving a small, pink bullet-looking device. Holding the bullet, she pulled up the bottom of her dress, sliding it between her legs. I nearly lost it when it started vibrating, drawing a throaty moan from her lips. I was so close to ripping the little toy from her hands and using it on her, but instead I jacked off like a fucking pervert.

I grind my teeth thinking about it, disappointed in myself. I should have fucking killed her.

Frankie picks up a rectangular contraption. I believe Ronin called it a cell phone. "Call Jess," she says.

"Calling Jess," it says back. My mind is still completely blown at this fascinating little contraption.

A female voice answers after one ring. "What are the police doing about Nate?"

Frankie huffs. “Nothing! They think Nate left town on his own because his truck is missing, but he left his freaking phone behind. Who goes days without their phone?”

“That’s bullshit! Did you tell them about dino?”

Ha! Dino must be the name of her stuffed dinosaur.

Frankie rubs her temples. “No. I was so mad when they refused to do anything about Nate, I just stormed out without mentioning the intruder.”

“Call them back and report it. Someone was in your house, Frankie. That’s scary.” At least one of them has some sense.

“If they won’t do anything about Nate, they definitely won’t do anything about an unknown person returning a stuffed animal to a grown-ass woman. I’ll just start locking my windows and doors,” Frankie says. “Maybe I’ll get a security system.”

I chuckle to myself. Like a security system could keep me out.

They chat more about some guy in a band, and a book Frankie is reading, before promising to check in with each other in the morning.

Frankie makes a few more calls looking for her brother but has no luck. She stands, stretching her arms overhead, and yawns.

Her t-shirt slides up, revealing her soft sexy stomach before she walks back into her house. What I wouldn’t give to sink my fangs into her perfectly smooth skin, marking her flesh so she knows she’s mine.

Fuck! I need to focus. It’s time to end this ridiculous infatuation I have with her and return to the home I haven’t seen in over twenty years. Tonight’s the night. Tonight, I

kill her.

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Frankie

“J ess, I’m fine.” I reassure her again. “The doors and windows are locked.”

A huff comes through the phone. “I’m canceling my date. You should not be alone tonight. What if that freak comes back?”

“Then I’ll call the cops.” Not that they’ll do anything. Calling the cops never helped when I was growing up. Why would it help now?

“At least let me drop MJ off for the night,” Jess begs. “I’ll feel better if she’s there with you.”

I roll my eyes. MJ, short for Mary Jane, is Jess’ bluenose pit bull. She’s afraid of her own tail and plastic bags. So, I don’t think she’ll be much help, but it seems to make Jess feel better.

“Sure! MJ probably misses her auntie, anyway.”

I can’t explain why I insist on staying in my house, knowing someone was inside it. Maybe it’s because I grew up in a house where I was always afraid, and now I refuse to be scared in my own home.

It’s not much, but this house means a lot to me. It’s the first place I ever felt safe, and I’m not letting this asshole ruin it.

An hour later, Jess drops MJ off and does a walkthrough of the house to make sure all

the windows are locked and secure.

Lingering by my front door, she glances between MJ and me, and I can see the wheels turning in her head. “Maybe I...”

“Nope,” I interrupt her before she can suggest cancelling her date for the tenth time since she’s arrived. “I need the alone time. I have MJ and everything is locked up nice and tight. If I need you, I’ll call. Now, go.” I lightly shove her through the door.

I make some chamomile tea, and grab the book I’m currently reading before, plopping on the couch. It’s not long before MJ is snoring with her head on my lap.

I reach the first spicy scene in my book where Xander tells Skylar to get on her knees when a loud thud outside makes me jump. It’s probably the door to the old tool shed slamming open and shut. It never latches properly, and the wind is really whipping tonight.

I tiptoe to the front door, cracking it open, my blanket still wrapped around my shoulders-only to remember we never replaced the yard light that burnt out a few months back. Shit! I’m not going out there to investigate. Not in the dark. I shut the door hoping the noise was nothing when I hear it again.

MJ trots to my side, whining. “Okay girl, do your thing.” I open the door again, nudging her outside with my foot. “Go see what’s out there.”

MJ makes it two feet before tucking her tail and running back inside. “You’re no help.”

I hurry to the kitchen, grabbing a knife and rummaging through the junk drawer until I find a flashlight and some bravado before stepping outside.

It's cloudy tonight, dimming the moonlight until its almost non-existent. The usual chirping of the crickets is silent. The night is still, making me uneasy.

Maybe I should call my big, nonexistent boyfriend, who just got out of prison, in case there is someone out there.

I hold my phone to my ear. "You're only two minutes away? Perfect! What did you say? You killed five people today. That's better than me. I only killed two." I make sure to raise my voice for the last part. Maybe the supposed intruder will go away if they think I'm crazy.

I only make it halfway to the shed when MJ starts barking her head off. Fuck this! I turn around and dash back inside the house. Once inside, I double check every lock and look out every window before returning the knife and flashlight.

"I'm sure it was nothing," I say out loud to help calm myself and MJ down. I'm just on high alert is all, which MJ is clearly picking up on. Maybe a nice hot shower will calm me down. Grabbing a towel from the dryer, I head to the bathroom.

I finish rinsing conditioner from my hair when I hear MJ whining and scratching at the bathroom door. I quickly turn off the water, wrap myself in a towel, and run to the door. I pull it open, and MJ sprints inside, nearly knocking me over.

"What is it, girl?" I nervously make my way to my bedroom. My stomach clenches, warning me to turn around as I walk through the door, but I don't listen.

I stop dead in my tracks; paralyzed by fear. Why didn't I grab the knife?

A large man is lying in my bed with his hands resting behind his head. A tuft of messy dark hair hangs over one eye. His amber eyes darken for a moment as he takes me in. Sitting up, he swings his long legs over the edge of my bed as he studies me.

It's the same man from the bar the other night. The same man I spent the past few nights fantasizing about when I touched myself. Why the hell is he in my bed?

A thousand scenarios run through my mind, none of them ending well. My eyes dart around the room, looking for my phone so I can call for help. Where did I put it?

"Looking for this, little one." Shit! He's holding my lifeline in his hands.

"M-my boyfriend will be here any minute." Taking a step back, I nervously pull the towel tighter around me, holding it in place.

Something in my gut is warning me to stay still; warning me not to move too quickly for fear of waking the predator not far from me.

"Shouldn't your serial killer boyfriend be here by now?" He smirks.

Fear floods my body like a tidal wave, forcing me to flee. I turn and bolt from the room, nearly tripping over MJ on my way to the front door.

Heavy footsteps steadily approach from behind me. He's not bothering to hurry. This is a game for him.

My shaking hands frantically fumble with the lock. It feels like an eternity before the door finally swings open.

Sprinting to the wood line, my heart pounds in my ears with every step. There is nothing around here for miles, making the woods my only option.

I find a deer path and keep running. Rocks and sticks cut the bottom of my bare feet, branches scratch my face, but I don't stop.

My towel snags on a branch, slowing me down, but it doesn't matter. He's close enough to catch me anyway.

A low growl is my only warning before his hands wrap around my waist, pulling me backwards. My back slams into his chest, my feet unable to touch the ground. I kick over and over, hoping to connect with his knees.

"Scream all you want, little one. There's no one around to hear you," he whispers.

No! This can't be happening. Think, Frankie. Think!

I once heard if someone wraps their arms around you, and you have no way to fight back, you should go limp and fall to the floor.

I turn myself into a rag doll, dropping to the hard ground. My towel comes undone as I use my hands to break my fall, leaving me completely exposed.

He studies my naked form, his eyes flickering between different shades of black. Our eyes meet briefly, and I swear something stirs in my chest.

Scrambling to my feet, I start running but don't make it far. A strong hand grabs my arm, whipping me around. He picks me up, throwing my naked body over his shoulder.

"This is how you defend yourself? By falling to the ground?" he growls, almost like he's scolding me for not fighting harder.

"Let me go!"

He holds my legs tightly against his chest, giving me enough leverage to straighten my body, so my hips are even with his ear. Thank you core exercises. I tower over his

head, digging my nails into his forehead as I drag them down his face.

“This is better, but we still need to work on your self-defense,” he chuckles, nipping at my left hip.

I switch to punching instead of scratching, but that causes him to laugh harder. “I’m going to fucking kill you!” I scream as I hit him over and over until my punches eventually turn into slaps. I finally wear myself out, collapsing back over his shoulder.

He spans my bare ass. “Are you done now?” he asks, completely unphased by my attack.

How is he so strong? I’m not light by any means, and he carries me, taking my assault like I’m a freaking feather. I’m useless against him.

“What do you want with me?” I yell, blood rushing to my head from hanging upside down.

Flipping me off his shoulder, he slams me against a tree. My head whips back, smacking against the hard trunk. The rough bark scratches my bare skin.

He grabs my neck and leans down, his lips only a centimeter from my ear. “Why, are you scared?”

The pressure in my chest feels like a vice, squeezing tighter with each breath. Of course I’m scared. What a dumb question. “Y-yes,” I stammer.

He inhales deeply, his eyes turning black once again. “You’re bleeding.”

“No shit, asshole! I just ran through the woods naked to get away from you.” Shit!

Why do I always run my mouth when I'm scared?

The corner of his mouth quirks up. With one hand still gripping my neck, he uses the other to pull a leaf from my hair, using it to trace a path over my collarbone and between my breasts. "I can't tell if I want to fuck you, or..."

"Or what?" I breathe out when he doesn't finish his sentence. Did my voice come out breathy? Not now, hormones.

His amber eyes flicker with excitement as they roam over my body. A low growl emanates from his throat, looking at me with a sinister hunger in his eyes. It's intoxicating.

Lust courses through my body, quickly followed by shame when I realize how wet I am. I'm so mad at myself for reacting this way. Why am I so turned on by this?

His gaze lands on my lips. He moves closer until he is only an inch from my mouth. Is he going to kiss me? Do I want him to? No, that's crazy. Instead, he says one word and releases me.

"Run."

I stand there in shock. He's letting me go. Oh my God! He's letting me go!

Relief floods through me even though my body begs for his touch. I ignore the brief flash of disappointment at not knowing what his lips taste like. I need to quit reading all those dark romance books. My stupidity is going to kill me one day.

I only make it two steps before he seizes my wrist, pulling me toward him. His other hand grabs a handful of hair, pulling my head back, exposing my throat. His hot tongue slides from my collar bone, all the way to my ear. Did I just whimper?

“Mmm,” he growls. “Now run before I change my mind and make you mine.”

Before I have time to contemplate why the fuck he’s letting me go, or why I’m so turned on, I run.

I don’t bother picking up my towel. My feet are torn up, and my body aches from fighting back, but I don’t stop running until I’m locked inside my house with a kitchen chair wedged under my bedroom doorknob.

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Zarreth

I pace the barn with clenched fists. The minute I realized she was bleeding, I couldn't go through with it. Fuck! Why can't I kill her? Why am I so fucking attracted to her?

The air shifts a second before a cloud of white smoke appears. Ronin materializes before my eyes, holding a bloody head. The stench of rotten eggs permeates the air.

Ronin tosses the head at me. "Have you seen anything like this before?"

I catch it and turn it around in my hands, studying the features. It smells like a dead hellhound but looks like a human with fangs. "No. Where the fuck did it come from?"

"I've been hanging around the Horde of Shadows, seeing what kind of intel I can get, when this fucker came out of nowhere," he explains. "It was in plain sight, foaming at the mouth. Charged right at me, so I ripped its head off."

The Horde of Shadows is the only demon horde allowed to live in the Human Realm because most of them have no wings or horns, making it easy to blend in. Dante, their overlord made a deal with the Elders centuries ago to protect the Human Realm in exchange for their blessing to live here.

"Does Dante know about it?" I ask. "There could be more out there."

"That's what I plan to find out. I doubt Dante would let these things run around. He has a good thing going with the Elders. He wouldn't want to attract their attention."

“Do you think Aradon has something to do with it?”

“I don’t know, but if he does, that’s all the more reason to kill the Realm Eater now, and be done with it,” Ronin growls.

I try controlling the rage bubbling beneath my skin, but I can’t stop the low growl from escaping my throat. I drop the head and stalk toward Ronin. “We can’t kill her.”

“What the fuck has gotten into you? You need to calm down, you’re eyes are turning black,” Ronin says, taking a couple steps back.

I blink my eyes a few times, managing to suppress my anger. “I can’t do it. I fucking tried, and I can’t. Maybe we can get our hands on a pair of binding cuffs and find a place to hide her....”

Ronin cuts me off. “So, we’re turning into Aradon now, huh? Holding demons against their will, taking away their fundamental rights. You know what happens when a demon’s powers are suppressed for too long. She would be better off dead.”

I bare my teeth, letting my fangs lengthen. “Don’t fucking say that again,” I growl.

“Why are you acting like this? You sacrificed yourself for decades so our horde would be safe. Why can’t you...” Ronin stops mid-sentence. He looks like he’s hit with an idea. “Holy shit! She’s your mate.”

I shake my head. No way. “Frankie Hart is not my mate. She’s not even fully demon.”

“If that’s true, then what’s your reason for not killing her? You know how dangerous she could be.”

Shit! He's right. I've had plenty of opportunities to kill her, but I can't bring myself to do it. I'm too drawn to her. But there's no way the Realm Eater could be my mate, is there? There must be another explanation for my attraction to her.

I huff. "Just give me a few days so I can sort this out. If, and that is a huge if, she is my mate, then we need to find another way. We need to kill Aradon."

"Ha, if it was that easy, he would have been dead decades ago."

I ignore Ronin's comment, even though it's true. "For now, can you find out if Dante knows anything about that hellhound, hell-human, whatever it is?"

"I'm already on it."

I wave my hand, sending the head up in flames.

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Frankie

“If you don’t call the cops now, I’ll do it for you.” Jess stabs her salad aggressively before forking a tomato into her mouth.

I tear a piece of chicken from my sandwich, feeding it to Ms. Kitty before taking a bite. MJ’s sleeping on her dog bed in the corner of the room, still recovering from last night.

“What are they going to do? They won’t even look for my missing brother,” I say with my mouth full. “Like they would do anything about a stranger standing on the edge of my property.”

“We have to at least report it.” Jess grabs her phone and walks outside.

I don’t know why I didn’t tell Jess what really happened last night. We never keep secrets from each other, but he did let me go, so he must not be a complete psycho, right?

I know it’s fucked up, but I was drawn to him. A part of me wanted to see what he would do if he came back. I always wondered what it would feel like to have someone fuck me until I couldn’t think. I bet my stalker knows exactly how to do that.

I really need to have my head examined.

Jess stomps back into the house, slamming her phone on the counter. She’s pissed.

“Small town cops act like they’ve got so much going on. They can’t do anything unless he comes on your property and threatens you. Isn’t it a little too late at that point? I swear, I’d make a better cop.”

The corners of my mouth curl up as I take the last bite of my sandwich. “I hate to say I told you so,” I say with my mouth full, amused.

“No, you don’t. Those are your favorite words,” she chides as she grabs the takeout containers, throwing them in the garbage. “Why don’t you stay with me until everything settles down?”

I fetch two cans of carbonated water from the fridge, handing her one. “I’m not letting this asshole scare me out of my own home. I spent enough time fearing my own home when I was a kid. I’m not doing it again.”

“I know, but this isn’t the same.”

I raise one eyebrow at her. “I’m not running away.”

“You are so stubborn,” Jess grumbles as she grabs her bag and walks outside.

“I know.” I bat my eyelashes at her, giving her my best smile as I follow her outside, sitting next to her on the front step.

The soft breeze gently caresses my skin. I close my eyes and listen to the birdsong. The land surrounding my house isn’t as intimidating in the light. I can’t believe I was chased through the woods. What’s even harder to believe is how much my body longed for him once I was safely locked inside my house. I shudder thinking about my stupidity and quickly change the subject.

“Now tell me about Brent. What are you guys going to do when the band leaves town

to make it big?” The best way to get Jess’ mind off something is to get her talking about herself.

Jess sighs. “I don’t know. I dropped so many hints about keeping in touch after he leaves, but I think he wants to see other people. I know we’re not serious, but I was hoping he wanted to try the long-distance thing.”

“It’s not a bad idea for you to see other people.” I grab her hand. “You just got out of a serious relationship. Don’t settle for someone because you’re scared of being alone. There are plenty of great guys out there.”

Jess rolls her eyes. “Says the person who hasn’t been on a date in years.”

“Hey, there was that one guy, Jack. We went out four times.” Maybe it was three times. I can’t remember.

Jess huffs. “Flashing your boobs at him while he was helping his niece sell Girl Scout cookies does not count as a date. And his name was Jake, not Jack.”

“What?!” I laugh, “That was not me! That was you in junior high, dork.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jess grins sheepishly. “We made a lot of money selling thin mints that day thanks to me.”

Jess pulls a baggie of dark green buds from her purse. “Speaking of Girl Scout cookies, I scored a parting gift from the band.”

“No way! If only we had actual cookies to go with it!” Caramel deLites would be amazing right now.

We smoke a joint, and our worries are soon replaced by giggles. Jess forgets about

Brent, and I push Nate and my stalker to the back of my mind for now.

Jess is sucking sugar off her sour patch kids, and I'm busy dumping crumbs from a Doritos bag into my mouth as we walk back to my house from the gas station when we hear a sickening, sucking noise coming from the woods.

"What the fuck was that?" Jess asks.

We take a few more steps before spotting an enormous silhouette crouched over a dead animal. The silhouette turns its head, fixing its glowing red eyes on us.

"Holy shit!" I grab Jess' hand as we cautiously walk backwards.

The silhouette stands at full height. He's almost seven feet tall, his skin so translucent you can see every vein running through his body. The creature steps into the light, bares his fangs, and hisses at us.

I drop the bag of groceries and rub my eyes. "Do you see that?" I ask, not trusting what I'm seeing.

"I was hoping the weed was making me see things, but you see it too?" Jess' voice shakes.

The creature runs toward us. "That's not the weed," I yell.

Jess and I turn to run when a large man rushes toward us from the opposite direction. He releases a deafening roar, leaps six feet in the air, and jumps over our heads.

I squeeze Jess' hand harder and scream. What the hell is happening?

The creature makes an ear-splitting screech, and charges forward. The man sprints

toward it. Their bodies collide, making a loud thud.

The creature snarls, baring its fangs. Quick, and obviously skilled in combat, the man unleashes a flurry of punches. Blood streams down the creature's face.

Just when it seems the man is victorious, the creature sinks its teeth into his shoulder. With a fierce roar, the man retaliates, driving his foot into the creature's kneecap, sending it crashing to the ground.

The man grabs the creature's head with both hands, twisting until it completely rips away, the body falling to the ground.

Holy shit! Was there something wrong with the weed? There is no way that happened.

The man's legs wobble, his movements growing sluggish. He drops the head, and the body beside him bursts into flames, quickly disintegrating into ash.

His amber eyes briefly lock on mine before taking a step toward us and collapsing to the ground.

"What the fuck? Did that just happen?" Jess shrieks.

I'm too shocked for words. Am I hallucinating? Jess must be too. Can two people hallucinate the same thing?

The man's groan pulls me from my stupor. I don't know why, but I run toward him. Jess grabs my arm to stop me, but I pull away. I can't resist the invisible magnet pulling me toward him.

"What are you doing? We watched him rip the head off a monster," Jess states with

wide eyes, her hands grabbing her chest.

I know it's stupid to go near this dangerous man, but the urge to be near him is too strong. "I know, but he saved us. We need to help him."

I stop dead in my tracks when I realize I recognize him.

It can't be.

I cautiously walk toward him. A small part of me is thrilled when I see it's my stalker.

Jess pulls out her phone. "I'll call 911."

I should be grateful he saved us, but I'm so stunned. What the hell is he doing here? Why is he following me?

"Frankie, are you okay?" Jess pulls me from my trance, her phone still in hand.

I nod my head. "Yeah, I'm fine. We can't call 911, though."

She looks at me like I've lost my mind. "Why not? He needs help."

"What would we tell them? I swear I'm not high, officer. A monster tried attacking us, so a random stranger leaped over us and ripped its head off. Not to mention, the body bursting into flames. They will lock us in the loony bin." Which is where I should obviously be right now, because I'm pretty sure being excited to see your stalker is certifiably insane.

"Do you have a better idea?" Jess asks.

What I should do is leave him here to die after last night. But he let me go, and he saved me just now. “Maybe we can call the ambulance and say we found him here.”

I kneel down next to him, pulling my phone from my back pocket, when a gigantic hand weakly covers mine. “No. No hospital,” he slurs before passing out again.

“Well shit,” Jess curses.

I don’t know why I say what comes out of my mouth next. Maybe it’s because I grew up in fear and secretly revel in it. Maybe it’s because I’m thinking with my stupid vagina instead of my head. “We should take him to the house. My brother has a well-stocked first aid kit.”

Jess stares at me like I just suggested we go skydiving without a parachute.

“We can’t just leave him here,” I say.

Huffing, she runs her hands down her face. “Okay, I’m completely sober now. I’ll get my car. You stay here in case he wakes up.” She takes off jogging towards my house.

It will take about fifteen minutes for her to return. I take the time to study my stalker’s features. I knew he was attractive, but damn, he is devastatingly handsome. His dark, long eyelashes rest on his cheeks. He has a strong chin and a straight nose. He’s much larger than I initially thought.

He only looks a few years older than me. How the hell did he rip the head off that thing’s body?

When Jess finally gets back, we spend thirty minutes loading the behemoth into the car. We drop him twice before pulling him into the back seat, only scraping his back a little. I’d say we’re doing pretty well considering the circumstances.

When we get home, we drag him from the car, leaving him where he lands in the driveway. Jess and I both stand over him with our hands on our hips, breathing heavily as we wonder what to do now.

Thank God neither of us are in the medical field. I'm sure moving him around this much isn't good for him, but he doesn't seem to have any broken bones so he's probably fine.

I look at my front porch. There's no way we're getting him up my steps. "Should we at least move him to the grass so he's not laying on sharp rocks?"

Jess stretches her back before bending over, grabbing his shoulder. "Alright, let's do it, but I'm not moving him again. He's freaking heavy."

Mustering up more strength, I squat down next to him. As I hook my arms under his other shoulder, a warm, earthy scent wraps around me. I suddenly feel an overwhelming sense of home, as if my soul recognizes his. Why does he have this effect on me? I definitely should not be feeling this way about him.

Dragging him across the gravel driveway, we place him next to the peonies in front of my porch. I can't help but admire his broad shoulders and muscular arms. I pull up his bloody shirt, looking for a wound. All I find is a fresh-looking scar, but nothing to cause this amount of blood.

"Maybe the blood is from the monster." Jess lifts the other side of his shirt.

We check him over the best we can, and other than his perfectly sculpted body, see nothing noteworthy. Too bad his pants aren't bloody. I wouldn't mind taking those off to check for wounds.

It's getting dark and chilly out, but I don't want to leave him alone, so we grab

blankets and snacks from inside the house and camp out in my front yard.

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Zarreth

I hear distant voices, but I can't make them out. What the fuck was another hell-human doing here?

My head is pounding. Apparently, the hell-human and hellhound share the same poison. I can tell my powers are still not at full strength because it's taking longer than usual to rid the poison from my body. I'm lucky its bite didn't kill me with how weak I am.

So, tell me what you want, what you really, really want.

What is that awful music? Maybe I'm dead. And why does it feel like someone is rubbing wet sandpaper on my cheek?

I open my eyes to find a cat licking my face. I'm covered by a blanket with dogs wearing sombreros printed on it, and a scarf is wrapped around my neck.

I lift one end of the scarf, studying the bright pink feathers. "Please tell me I'm dead."

"Hey, Toddy is awake!" a voice exclaims.

I sit up and look around. You have got to be fucking kidding me. I let Frankie escape last night, and she brings me back to her house? She is clearly not right in the head.

"Who is Toddy?" I finally ask.

“You are, Silly!” says the redhead wearing a yellow boa and a cowboy hat. But I barely notice her. My eyes are locked on Frankie. Fuck, she’s sexy; even with her ridiculous green boa and heart-shaped sunglasses.

I hear her heart racing. Her breath catches in her throat before she swallows and stutters, “Um, ah...”

The redhead cuts her off. “You’ve been out for a while, and we didn’t know your name, so we called you Toddy McHotty, for obvious reasons.”

I ignore her as I watch Frankie fidget with her necklace. I make her nervous, as I should. If she were smart, she would stay the fuck away from me. If I were smart, I would kill her and get this over with.

Turns out I’m not so smart because instead of ripping both their heads off and destroying the evidence I ask, “Why are pink feathers around my neck?”

“We didn’t want to leave you out.” The chatty redhead again. I wish she would shut the fuck up and let Frankie speak. “We all match, see.”

The two girls hold out their hands, each fingernail a different color. Frankie’s hands are trembling. She’s trying to act calm, but I can smell her fear.

The redhead doesn’t seem the least bit frightened by me. Frankie must not have told her about last night. Interesting.

I hold my hands out and find I also have an assortment of colors on my nails.

“You have got to be kidding me.” I lay back, covering my eyes with my well-manicured hands. Thank gods Ronin isn’t here to see this. I would never hear the end of it.

“You should thank us. We saved your life.” The redhead puts her hands on her hips. She’s really starting to annoy me. I want to hear Frankie’s voice, not hers.

Frankie swallows a few times, looking at her friend. She finally speaks, her sultry voice quivering. “Technically, he saved our lives. We only bounced quarters off his chest and took shots of whiskey until he woke up.”

She wraps her arms around herself, her shoulders curl inward. Shifting her weight back and forth, she looks like she wants to crawl out of her own skin.

“Either way, we should go inside. It’s getting cold,” the redhead says.

Frankie shakes her head, taking a few steps back. She’s pale as a ghost. I watch the wheels turn in her head, deciding whether to invite me in.

The redhead turns to Frankie and adds “Are you okay? You’re acting weird.”

Frankie stammers again.

The redhead grabs her arm, dragging her a few yards away. “What’s going on?”

“Do you think it’s smart inviting a stranger into the house?”

“Yes! He saved our lives. I feel way safer having him here. I love MJ, but she is not a watchdog to say the least.”

“He makes me nervous,” Frankie says, causing me to suppress a smile. I should make you nervous, little one.

“That’s because he’s fucking hot, and he hasn’t taken his eyes off you since he woke up. If you don’t invite him in, I will.”

I wonder why Frankie didn't tell her friend about me. She needs to stop being so fucking reckless. I bet she didn't even call the cops.

Frankie huffs. "Fine, maybe we can find out what actually happened back there."

The girls walk back towards me, and Frankie gathers the blankets.

"So, I'm Jess, and this is Frankie," the redhead, Jess, says.

"Zarreth." I stand, brushing myself off. "It's nice to meet you," I say even though I haven't looked in Jess' direction since I came to. Frankie is the one I can't take my eyes off.

I reach out to take the blankets from her when our fingers touch, the same shock that went through my body last night surges through me again. I thought it was from the chase, but apparently she still has this effect on me.

Her eyes widen, and I know she feels it too.

I take a step closer, neither of us look away from one another. For a second, I forget where I am. I'm captivated by the kaleidoscope of green in her eyes.

"So, are we going in, or are you two just going to stand there eye-fucking each other?" Jess interrupts, bringing us back to reality. I barely manage to suppress a growl.

Frankie's cheeks turn the faintest shade of pink, making me smile. "Shut up, Jess," she grumbles.

"Do I make you nervous, little one?" I whisper.

She looks away, nodding her head. I lean in, purring in her ear. “I won’t hurt you.”

I don’t know why I promise her that. I’m still not sure what I’m going to do with her, but I can use tonight to get to know her better. She’s safe for now.

“Um, that was weird, and incredibly hot.” Jess scoops the cat up in her arms. “We can’t forget Cinnamon Williams!”

“It’s Ms. Kitty!” Frankie rolls her eyes, breaking our eye contact. “Cinnamon Williams sounds like a stripper name.”

“That’s why I gave her a last name. It’s classier that way.” Jess laughs as we all walk toward the house. “Come on, MJ.”

I notice the dog from last night watching me wearily from under the steps. She doesn’t try to move. Instead, she crouches lower to the ground as we approach the porch. “Let’s go, MJ! Why are you being such a baby?”

Maybe because the dog is the only one with common sense around here.

Frankie finds a bone and uses it to lure MJ inside, and just like that the dog forgets all about the demon standing two feet from her. She wags her tail, curling up on a small dog bed with her treat. Some watchdog you are.

Frankie’s nerves seem to calm once inside. She takes the blankets from me and throws them on the couch.

I can’t believe she let me inside her house. It fucking pisses me off. She is turning herself into an easy target.

“What the hell happened back there?” Frankie asks, turning on me as soon as her

arms are empty. “And what was the thing that tried attacking us?”

Even though her voice is a little stronger, she still looks like she is about to flee at any moment; but something is keeping her in place. Maybe she feels the same strong pull towards me as I do her.

“I was walking by when I saw him running toward you guys,” I explain. “I could tell he was trouble, so I yelled at him to leave. When he didn’t, I roughed him up a bit.”

“And by roughed him up a bit, you mean rip his head off and get yourself knocked out?” Jess crosses her arms.

“Rip his head off? How much alcohol did you two drink? Like I could rip his head off,” I lie.

“But we saw it happen. He was enormous, and scary, and had fangs. And you jumped over our heads, landing in front of him. But that’s impossible, right?” Frankie states.

“Even I can’t jump that high, little one. Besides, I don’t remember seeing fangs. I broke his nose when I punched him in the face. That’s where all the blood came from.”

Jess digs in the cupboard. “That doesn’t explain what the hell it was eating in the woods, or his body turning to ash.”

“I hate to say it, but you guys were seeing things. You’ve obviously been drinking. Maybe the alcohol mixed with your adrenaline made you hallucinate.”

I feel Frankie’s nerves turn to anger. She raises her eyebrow at me. “I know what I saw, Zarreth. We did not hallucinate. Besides, we didn’t start drinking until after we brought you here.”

My gods this girl is stubborn. Why is that turning me on? “Well, I know what I saw, Frankie, and it wasn’t a monster with fangs turning to ash.”

“Why would I believe you? You’re a psycho.”

“Oh my God, Frankie! We need to work on your flirting skills,” Jess chastises.

Frankie looks at her. “I’m not flirting with him.”

“Maybe I’m flirting with you,” I suggest, watching color rise to her cheeks.

Jess pops a cracker in her mouth. “Brent said there’s a new drug out there. He warned me to stay away from it, like I’m an addict. I only smoke weed. Maybe it was a crazy guy on drugs.”

“Jess is right.” I’m thankful for the bone she unknowingly throws me. “There’s a new drug on the streets making people go crazy. It causes hallucinations, extreme paranoia, and violence. Some people report having superhuman strength. There was a case recently where someone ate the face off another person.” I honestly have no idea if there is a drug problem here.

“It still makes no sense to me.” Frankie looks suspicious. I can tell she doesn’t believe a word I said, but she drops the topic for now.

“We should just be happy Zarreth was there when he was. We have some whiskey left. We should celebrate!” Jess exclaims.

“Celebrate what?” Frankie asks. She hasn’t really taken her eyes off me since I came to. She’s still not sure what to think of me. She should be fucking frightened. I almost killed her last night.

“Being alive! Between Nate missing and your stalker, we have every reason to let loose a little.” Jess runs outside to grab the bottle of whiskey.

“A stalker, huh?” I sit back on her couch, making myself at home.

She backs away from me. “Yeah, well, I called the cops so anyone who wants to harm me should probably look out.”

“And did these cops offer you any help?” I ask knowing they didn’t do shit.

“Yeah, they’re sending a patrol car by my house every hour to make sure he doesn’t come back,” she lies.

I lean back, looking out the window. “Interesting. I haven’t seen them come by your place yet.”

Frankie’s face turns white when she realizes I know she’s bluffing. She looks like she might cry. “I won’t hurt you,” I tell her. “Not until you want me to.”

Her eyes widen. “I don’t know what kind of kinky shit you’re into, but you can count me out.”

“Is that why you moaned last night when a complete stranger chased you through the woods, grabbed you by the neck and tasted your sweet skin? Because you’re not into kinky shit? Maybe you’re just into me.” I love watching her squirm.

Frankie opens her mouth to say something, but Jess bursts back through the door.

“Let’s get this party started,” she yells, staggering into the living room.

Frankie grabs her by the hand. “Come with me.” She pulls Jess into her bedroom and

shuts the door like that will prevent me from hearing their conversation.

“Dude,” Jess says. “He’s hot, and he can’t take his eyes off you.”

“Isn’t it weird partying with a complete stranger?” Frankie asks.

“Now, you’re concerned? You wouldn’t report that psycho stalker, but you’re worried about a sexy guy who literally saved our lives?”

“We don’t know him.”

“I feel better having him here. No one in their right mind would come after you with that menacing giant here.”

I hear drawers open and close. “What are you looking for?” Frankie asks.

“You don’t expect him to hang out with blood all over his shirt, do you?”

The girls return to the living room, giggling, holding a t-shirt. Some color has returned to Frankie’s skin.

Apparently, Jess’ little pep talk has her feeling better about our current situation. Which makes me question her sanity. Why the fuck would she trust me in her house? She has a lot to learn if we’re going to keep her safe. Not that I’m going to keep her safe.

“Here.” She throws a t-shirt at me that’s four sizes too big for her.

I hold it up, staring directly at a man’s hairy chest, the pink triangle of a bikini barely covering his nipples. “Do I even want to ask?”

“Jess and I dressed as mermaids one year for Halloween,” Frankie says. “It’s the only shirt I have large enough to fit you.”

“And when you decided to dress as a mermaid, this is what you came up with?”

Frankie looks offended. “I had a tail. You should be happy it’s not her Halloween costume, or you’d be stuck with a seashell bra.”

I don’t question why it makes me happy she wasn’t running around half naked for other men to see. I shouldn’t care what she does, but apparently I do because the thought of other people seeing her in a bra makes me see red.

I quickly change into the mermaid shirt. The girls laugh hysterically when I come out of the bathroom. Frankie covers her mouth, giggling until she snorts.

I wish she wouldn’t hide her smile. That little gap between her teeth is fucking adorable.

The rest of the night consists of terrible music and obnoxious singing. The more whiskey Frankie drinks, the less tense she becomes. Her worries melt away as she and Jess join hands, dancing around the living room like two tipsy hyenas giggling uncontrollably.

I stretch out on the recliner, Ms. Kitty curled at my feet. What is it with all these trusting females? Most animals fear demons, but of course Frankie’s cat is attached to me.

Jess passes out on the couch, while Frankie dances in a circle wearing Jess’ cowboy hat and two feather boas.

She lowers her heart-shaped glasses, looking me in the eyes while nibbling on her

lower lip. She saunters toward me with an exaggerated sway in her hips. She's so fucking sexy.

"So, Todd the Bod, I should repay you for saving us." Frankie straddles my lap.

Leaning in, she parts her lips like she's waiting for me to close the gap between us. Her gaze moves to my mouth, her green eyes now glowing like vibrant emeralds.

My cock hardens, and I know Frankie can feel it because I smell her arousal. The scent of warm vanilla and honey awakens a hunger in me I didn't know existed.

"I'm glad your name isn't Todd." Frankie moves her hips over me and loops a boa around my neck. "Zarreth is the sexiest name I've ever heard."

"Fuck," I breathe. Hearing my name come from her lips almost cripples me. I need to get her off me before I lose control.

Frankie grabs onto my shoulders, leaning back. Her grip loosens, and she almost falls.

I catch a hold of her, using the opportunity to lift her up. Her lips brush against the side of my neck, her kisses quickly turning into nibbles as I carry her to her room.

"As much as I would love to fuck you until you can no longer walk, you're drunk, and I do have a shred of decency," I whisper in her ear.

My life would be so much easier if I didn't have that shred of decency. I should kill her right now and be done with this, but I can't. Something inside me wants only to protect her, to keep her safe from anyone who even thinks about laying a finger on her.

She sticks out her bottom lip, pouting. I can't help but chuckle. How can someone so sexy, look so fucking cute?

I press my lips against her forehead and tuck her into bed before sitting back in her chair, watching her sleep.

I'm so fucked. I can't believe I thought I could kill her. Is it possible she could be my mate? No one has ever had this effect on me before.

I scribble a quick note on a piece of paper and leave it on Frankie's nightstand. I need to find Ronin and see if he discovered anything about these hell-humans roaming around.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

I sit up, stretching my arms overhead while yawning. I'm surprised to wake up without a headache or nausea considering all the alcohol I drank. Looking over, I spot a note on my nightstand.

Thanks for the fun night. Call me sometime. 555-123-4567. ~Zarreth, the sexiest name you ever heard.

Bits and pieces of the night come back to me. I can't believe I tried giving my stalker a lap dance. Was I really licking his neck while he carried me to my room?

My thighs clench together remembering what Zarreth whispered in my ear about fucking me. I imagine what his strong hands and firm lips could do to me.

Jesus, what has gotten into me lately? It's been over a year since I've had sex, and I couldn't care less. Now I'm suddenly making out with random drummer's and fantasizing about doing it with my stalker.

If Zarreth hadn't had the shred of decency he bragged about, I would be walking bowlegged today. What is wrong with me? I never act this way. Especially over someone who may have ripped someone's head off last night. Maybe I should raise my standards.

It's possible things didn't happen exactly how I remember them. It sounds like the new drug going around is bad news. The guy in the woods yesterday was probably doped out.

If the drugs Brent referred to can cause people to eat human flesh, then eating an animal in the woods is not very far-fetched. I can also admit Zarreth jumping over our heads may be an exaggeration.

But it's impossible for someone to burst into flames and turn to ash. I know I didn't imagine that. Something crazy is going on, and my gut tells me it's related to Nate's disappearance. I have a feeling my stalker knows more than he's letting on.

Opening my nightstand, I grab the old magic 8 ball my brother gave me.

"Is my stalker dangerous?"

I shake the 8 ball, watching as the word yes appears.

Maybe I need to be more specific. "Is my stalker dangerous to me?"

Maybe.

I glare at the dumb toy. "What do you know?"

I decide to give it one more try, shaking it again. "Should I text my stalker?"

Yes. It's a sign. It would be reckless of me to ignore it.

I return the 8 ball to my nightstand and grab my phone. Tiptoeing past Jess, who's snoring on my couch next to MJ, I make my way to the kitchen. I start the coffee, deciding to text Zarreth while I wait for it to brew.

You must have misheard me.

I said Zarreth was the craziest

name I ever heard. Thank you for

tucking me in last night.

His reply is almost instant.

Is that so? Then why were you

kissing my neck? And it was my

pleasure tucking you in.

Maybe you were just

fantasizing about me

kissing your neck.

Trust me, little one, your pretty

little mouth does a lot more than

kiss when I fantasize about you.

Heat rises in my cheeks. Why would someone who looks like him fantasize about me? Before I can change my mind, I shoot him another message.

Can I take you to breakfast as

payment for saving us last night?

Obviously, I don't want to see him again. That would be crazy. I just need to get some information from him, and we will be in a public setting. That's safe, right?

I'm not much of a breakfast guy,

but I would love to buy you breakfast.

Pick you up in an hour?

That sounds great. See you soon.

I pour myself some coffee, internally admonishing myself for being so reckless. I try waking Jess to see if she wants to join us, but she threatens to kick my ass if I don't let her sleep. I convince her to at least take ibuprofen before she zonks out again.

Honestly, if Zarreth wanted to hurt me, he would have done it already. Instead, he refused my advances and tucked me into bed. He's either the worst stalker who ever existed, or he has no intention of hurting me.

Or maybe I'm making excuses because I'm hopelessly attracted to him. Either way, I change into my cutest sundress and apply some mascara before waiting on the porch.

I make my usual calls to Nate's boss and friends. They all said they would let me know if they hear from him, but I call anyway. I don't know what else to do; doing nothing is driving me crazy.

A few minutes later, Zarreth pulls into my driveway. He hops out of a Jeep, smiling at me. Damn, he's sexy. I bet he gets whatever he wants with that smile.

"Hi," I say, walking toward the Jeep, my voice quieter than intended. Apparently, I'm a little nervous hanging out with my stalker without any liquid courage in my system.

Zarreth's eyes roam over my body. "I like you in a dress," he says as he rounds the vehicle, opening the door for me. I make a mental note to wear this dress more often. Not that I need to impress a dude, but I would do anything to have him look at me that way again.

"Thank you. You don't look so bad yourself when you're not covered in blood." That's an understatement. Zarreth is absolutely gorgeous. I wonder if he has a girlfriend. Someone with those mesmerizing eyes and six-pack abs surely can't be single.

He inhales deeply as I crawl into the passenger seat. "You smell like warm honey." His voice deepens when he says the word honey, making my thighs squeeze together.

It's a short drive to my favorite diner, well, the only diner in town. It's the kind of place where they fry their eggs in bacon grease, and every Friday their chicken strips taste like fish because of the all you can eat fish-fry.

I order chocolate chip pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns, orange juice, and coffee. Zarreth orders a coffee.

"I can't believe you don't eat breakfast." I shove a huge bite of syrupy pancakes into my mouth. Maybe I should act more lady-like, but I'm starving. I'm always hungry lately.

"I never feel like eating food in the mornings, but I could watch you eat all day." Zarreth leans forward, wiping syrup off my lip before sucking it off his thumb. My mind goes blank. Why was that so hot?

"I... um... should... do you want more coffee?" I blurt out, holding up the carafe. Real smooth, Frankie.

Zarreth chuckles and gives me a sinful smile. "I would love some."

He looks at me like he wants to devour me for breakfast, and I can't stop my cheeks from turning red. His eyes are so intense. It's hard not to get lost in their odd amber color.

He must know the effect he has on me. The effect he has on everyone for that matter. The waitress can't keep her eyes off him either, but Zarreth doesn't notice her. In fact, he doesn't seem to notice anyone. Only me, but why?

"Why are you stalking me?" I blurt out.

Zarreth leans across the table, taking my hands in his, sending a shock up my arms. I study the way our fingers intertwine-his large and rough, mine small and delicate. The warmth of his palms comforting despite our current conversation.

"I don't know," he replies.

His honesty throws me off guard. "What do you mean you don't know? What do you want from me?"

Zarreth inhales deeply, the flirty demeanor leaving his body. He looks at me like he is peering deep into the depths of my soul. "Everything," he says.

An audible gulp leaves my throat. "Will you hurt me?"

"Only if you want me to."

My eyes widen to the point of almost aching, and I pull my hands away. "You scare me."

“You scare me too,” he says.

I giggle nervously. It’s a terrible habit I have. My stupid giggle has gotten me into so much trouble over the years.

I chew on my bottom lip. “I don’t scare anyone.”

“You have no idea what you’re capable of.” The tone of his voice causes my breath to catch in my throat. He looks at me like he is in awe, and it makes me uncomfortable. People don’t look at me that way.

I finish eating breakfast, and we walk out to his Jeep.

“What do you want to do now?” he asks.

I put my hands on my hips. “I could show you my most favorite spot in the whole entire world, but apparently you already know since you put dino in my car the other day.”

Zarreth opens the Jeep door. “I was trying to show you how easy of a target you are. Your house and car were both unlocked. You’re lucky it was me and not someone else stalking you.”

“Oh gee, thank you,” I say sarcastically as I slide into the passenger seat.

He smirks. “Any time, little one.”

We don’t say much on our drive to Beauty Lake, but the silence isn’t awkward like it usually is with a stranger. In fact, I feel quite peaceful in Zarreth’s presence.

We get to the lake, and Zarreth grabs a blanket from the Jeep. We walk down the

overgrown trail before removing our shoes and settling onto the blanket.

I pluck a dandelion from the ground and roll the stem between my fingers. “My brother and I came here a lot when we were kids. He’s been missing for about a week now.” Despite my efforts, my voice cracks.

“Really?” He props himself up on one elbow. His eyes intently focused on me. “Do you think he’s in trouble?”

“I don’t know. Nate would never leave without telling me. We live together, and we always check in with each other.” I pluck a few more dandelions and begin weaving them together.

“Have you gone to the police?”

“Yes. Apparently, nothing can be done with his truck missing and no evidence of foul play. I called all his friends, his boss, and drove everywhere looking for him. I found his cell phone when I searched his room. Why would he leave it behind if he left on his own?”

“If there is anything I can do to help, please ask,” he says softly. My heart softens when I see the sincerity on his face.

“I know you think I was hallucinating last night, but I can’t stop thinking about that body turning to ash. I found ash in Nate’s room. I feel like they’re connected somehow.” I struggle to make a bracelet from the dandelions, so I throw them to the ground.

Zarreth picks one up, tucking it behind my ear. “Frankie, I don’t mean to upset you, but that man didn’t burn up last night. It’s impossible.”

I'm so frustrated. I know what I saw, but I can't argue with logic. "Well, then Nate's disappearance has to do with those drugs."

"Is your brother into drugs?"

We smoke weed, but Nate would never do real drugs. "I don't think so, but it's the only thing that makes sense. Maybe Jess can ask Brent if he knows any drug dealers around here."

I shoot Jess a text. I know it's a long shot, but it's all I have.

Zarreth tugs on my braid. "It's dangerous for a cute little thing like you to confront a drug dealer by yourself."

"I won't be by myself. You'll be with me." I give him my most convincing smile. "You said you wanted to help."

"I would do anything for you, Frankie." His words make me melt a little inside.

"It's a date then." I smile, this one more genuine. "Speaking of dates, you don't have a girlfriend or wife, do you?"

"Not yet." Zarreth grins as a wicked light gleams in his eyes, his gaze sliding over me.

I want to believe he's interested in me, but he could have anyone. Why me?

"Aren't you going to ask me if I have a boyfriend?" I tease.

Zarreth's eyes darken as he growls, "I don't care if you have a boyfriend, Frankie. It won't stop me from making you mine."

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Zarreth

Fuck! I quickly turn away. I can sense my eyes turning from amber to black at the thought of someone else in Frankie's life. I've never had this kind of feral response to someone before.

"Woah there, Todd," Frankie sasses. "I belong to no one."

Once my eyes return to normal, I look back at her. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Not yet." She grins, batting her eyelashes at me.

This girl is going to be the death of me. She lays back on the blanket with her arms folded behind her head. Her smooth legs cross at the ankles. She looks so innocent with her sundress on, and her braided hair.

It's hard to believe she doesn't have a boyfriend. Not like that would keep her safe from me. I would easily remove him from the picture.

"Do you come here often?" I change the subject, trying to get my mind off how delicious she looks so I don't rip her dress off and find out if she tastes as good as she smells.

"This place was a sanctuary for Nate and me growing up. We came here all the time when our parents fought." Frankie sits up.

"Did your parents fight a lot?"

“Technically it was my mom and stepdad. He was a piece of shit. He beat my mom every time he got drunk. When Nate turned ten, he tried protecting my mom, which only resulted in him getting beat too.”

“Did he ever hit you?” I clench my fists until my knuckles crack.

She looks down at her hands. “No, my mom would hide me in our small pantry when he came home drunk. She thought she was protecting me by putting a padlock on it, but sometimes she would go on a bender afterwards and forget about me.”

I grab her hand, interlacing my fingers with hers. There’s that spark again. Every time I touch her, my body reacts to her. It’s like my soul knows she is mine.

She must be my mate, but there is only one way to know for sure, and I’m certain Frankie would freak out if I tried fucking her right now.

She gives me a small smile before continuing to speak. “Back then, Nate rarely came home. He always stayed the night at his friend’s house, until he found me locked in the pantry after three or four days of me being in there. Mom left for a month that time, forgetting all about me. After that, Nate rarely left my side. He stayed home every night, enduring everything that son of a bitch put him through just to make sure I was safe. He ended up in the hospital a few times trying to protect me.”

Pure rage consumes me at the thought of little Frankie being scared and alone. I will find that bastard someday, and I will savor every scream I rip from his fucking throat.

I take a deep breath to get my composure before kissing the back of Frankie’s hand. “Do you still see them?”

“Nope. Nate and I have been on our own since I was sixteen. My mom hightailed it out of Minnesota on my birthday, and the asshole left soon after that. I spent most of

my teen years at Jess' house. Her family took me in like one of their own. I even had my own spot at the dinner table." Frankie checks her phone.

"When do you think Jess will get back to you?" I ask, changing the subject again before I go on a bender of my own. The kind that will result in her mom and stepdad being fucking dead.

"Who knows? She was snoring hard when I left this morning." She looks at me with her big innocent eyes. "I wonder how we should kill time while we wait to hear from her?"

Grabbing her chin, I rub my thumb over her bottom lip. "I can think of a few things."

"Me too." Frankie bites my thumb and licks it before she jumps up. "Let's skip rocks."

Groaning, I fall back on the blanket. Did I mention this girl will be the death of me? "What do you mean by skip rocks?"

"Don't tell me you've never skipped a rock before." She pulls on my hand. I stand, following her to the edge of the water. "The flatter the rock the further it will go," she explains.

She must find the perfect rock because she stands sideways and throws it. The rock skims the surface, making five splashes before it disappears under the water. I find a rock I hope works. I throw it, watching as it immediately sinks to the bottom.

"That was pathetic." Frankie giggles, covering her mouth.

"I'll show you pathetic." I chase her along the shore.

Squealing, she pulls her dress over her head and runs into the water. Her pink lacy bra and matching panties leave nothing to the imagination. She dives under, her perfect ass breaking the surface.

All I want to do is strip down and follow her, but the scars on my back will raise too many questions so I just stand here like a fucking idiot.

“What’s the matter? Is the big, tough guy afraid of a little water?” she teases, her smartass mouth turning me on more than I already am.

“Nope. I’m just afraid I won’t be able to control myself now that you’re wet and practically naked.”

“Well, you better learn quickly because here I come.” She barrels out of the water and leaps on me.

She wraps her long, wet legs around my waist, and I hold her by the back of her thighs. Grabbing my baseball cap, she flips it backwards onto her wet head. I can’t resist, so I lean in to taste her mouth.

Just before our lips touch, Frankie’s phone rings. It takes everything in me not to smash it into a million pieces.

“Shit,” she groans. I wonder if she can feel the bulge in my jeans as she drops her legs, sliding down my body.

Frankie bends to pick up her phone, showing me her sweet, round ass; an ass I would worship every single day if she let me. “Hello?”

I hear Jess on the other end. “What are you doing that has you so breathless? Wait, are you with Zarreth? Did you finally get laid?”

“Jess!” she squeals. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Well, it wouldn’t kill you to get a little. It’s been forever since you’ve had a good boinking. Plus, Zarreth is hot. I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

Frankie’s cheeks turn red, and I hold back a grin. An odd sense of satisfaction courses through me knowing she hasn’t been with anyone for a while.

“Do you have any information for me?” she asks, hitting the speaker button.

“I do, and Frankie, I don’t think you should dig into this. Brent said a new drug called K4 is out there, and it’s some scary shit. He didn’t want to give me the information, but I promised him a blowjob the next time I see him.”

“Aw. Look at you, sacrificing so much for your best friend,” Frankie says sarcastically. “So, did he give you a name?”

Jess takes a deep breath. “It’s a biker gang called The Horde of Shadows. Brent knows someone who ended up in a coma and never woke up all because he hit on one of their women. I’m serious, Frankie. You should stay away. Nate would never be involved with drugs, anyway.”

Fuck! The Horde of Shadows is Dante’s demon horde. They disguise themselves as a biker gang so everyone leaves them alone. There is no way in hell I’m letting Frankie go there.

And what the fuck are they doing selling drugs to humans? Is that where the hell-humans are coming from? If Dante finds out what his horde is doing, there will be hell to pay.

“I know, but what choice do I have?” Frankie shivers, so I pick up the blanket,

wrapping it around her. She leans into me as I pull her close.

“I don’t know, but we should at least talk about it. I’m still at your house. When will you be back?”

“We’ll be there soon.” Frankie disconnects the phone, and we gather our things.

I swoop her up before heading to the Jeep. “We can’t have those pretty little toes stepping on anything sharp.”

When we walk into the house, we find Jess sitting on the kitchen counter, eating a slice of pizza. Her hair is damp, and she’s wearing a t-shirt she must have borrowed from Frankie because it says ‘Grass Roots Greenery’ on it.

“Oh, thank God.” Frankie grabs a piece for herself and hops on the center island. She plucks a pepperoni from the top, popping it in her mouth.

“Didn’t you just eat breakfast?” Jess asks.

Frankie takes a huge bite. “Yeah, but I’m famished already.”

“I would ask if you’re eating for two, but we both know that’s not possible,” Jess teases.

Frankie glares at her but ignores her jab. “Do you think Brent can set us up with a meeting?”

“No,” I say. There’s no fucking way I’m letting her go. She’ll be a walking target with her scent.

Frankie’s head whips toward me. “What do you mean, no?”

How the hell am I going to convince her this is a bad idea without revealing the truth?
“I mean what I said. I can’t let you go, it’s too dangerous.”

Jess points to me. “I’m with him.”

Frankie hops off the counter, takes two steps toward me, and cranes her neck up, looking me in the eyes. With her hands on her hips she says, “You don’t own me, Zarreth, and you can’t stop me from going, so you might as well get it out of your big head.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. Damn it this woman is stubborn, which for some odd reason makes me want to fuck her sassy, little mouth. “Frankie, listen to me. The Horde of Shadows are not what you think they are.”

She looks at me like I’m dumb. “How would you know that? You’re just trying to convince me not to go.”

Shit. How the fuck am I supposed to make her see reason without telling her the truth? Not that she would believe me anyway. “Would you just listen to me?”

“Why would I? I barely know you,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

I guess I have no choice but to tell her. It’s the only way she’ll listen. “They’re not a biker gang. They just use that as a cover.”

“Well, then what are they?” she demands.

“They’re demons.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

What the hell is he talking about? Why does he think I'm so gullible? First, he tries to convince me that I hallucinated things, then he tells me demons exist. "Yeah right! How dumb do you think I am?"

He runs a hand through his hair while resting his hip against the kitchen counter. "I know it's hard to believe but think about it. You started putting the pieces together yourself."

Is it possible he's telling the truth? He looks so sincere, and it would explain the creature in the woods yesterday. But demons? That's crazy. "There's no way they exist." I look at Jess for backup. "Right?"

Jess sets the pizza box on the garbage can as she contemplates the possibility of demons existing. "I don't know. Maybe he's telling the truth. The last time I checked, humans don't burst into flames when they die."

I know she's right, but if that's true then...Oh my God! Did Zarreth really kill a demon with his bare hands yesterday? I take a few steps back as everything sinks in. "Zarreth, what are you?" My voice trembles.

"Frankie, I would never hurt you," he says, taking a step closer to me.

I want to believe him, but he's already proven himself to be a little unhinged by stalking me. Holy shit, my stalker is a demon. Is he a demon? Don't demons have horns or something?

Spotting the broom next to the fridge, I slowly back toward it. “Answer me! What the hell are you?”

He takes another step closer to me. I grab the broom, raising it over my head like a baseball bat. “No you don’t. You stay right the fuck there.”

Holding back a grin, he raises his hands in surrender. “I think you know what I am.”

I don’t know what comes over me, but I lose it and swing the broom at his head. He catches it before I can smack the smirk off his face, easily pulling it from my grip.

“Shit.” I wasn’t expecting him to disarm me so quickly.

“Are you trying to turn me on right now?” Zarreth’s eyes darken. “Would you like me to bend you over and spank you with this broom?”

I scream in frustration. “What is wrong with you? You just said you would never hurt me!”

“Um, Frankie,” Jess chimes in. “I don’t think he means that kind of hurt.”

“What?” I turn my attention to Jess. “How are you not losing your mind over this?”

She shrugs her shoulders. “He’s had a million opportunities to kill us but hasn’t. Plus, I can tell you like him, and you never like anyone. It doesn’t surprise me it takes a demon to get your attention. Poor humans never stood a chance with you.”

“Jess! This is serious,” I squeak. Is everyone riding the crazy train?

“What?” She says. “Think about it. If demons have Nate, wouldn’t it be nice to have this guy on our side?”

I take a couple deep breaths, trying to clear my head. Jess is right. If I want to find my brother, Zarreth may be my best bet.

I turn to the demon standing in my kitchen, who's leaning against the kitchen counter with the broom still in his hand. I almost laugh at how domesticated he looks before I remember he's a freaking demon. "Will you help me find my brother?"

He nods his head. "I wasn't lying when I said I would do anything for you."

"Then come with me to meet the Horde of the Dead or whatever the hell they call themselves."

He leans the broom against the wall before rubbing his temples. "I know their overlord. Let me go alone, and I'll find out everything they know."

Just when I thought my sanity had returned, he goes and tests my patience. I pick up a coffee cup and throw it at him. "I swear, Zarreth. If you try talking me out of going one more time I'm going to lose it."

He catches the cup. Setting it gently in the sink, he turns to Jess. "Is she always this violent?"

"No," she says. "I think you bring the crazy out in her."

I growl, stomping to the living room, and plop down on the couch.

Jess and Zarreth follow me. Jess sits on one end of the couch as Zarreth sits on the brown recliner farthest away from me.

I close my eyes and take two deep breaths before speaking. "Jess, please set up the meeting with the stupid demon horde. Zarreth, please come with me, and stop treating

me like a child.”

“Let me set up the meeting,” Zarreth says. I open my mouth to argue, but he cuts me off. “I won’t stop you from going, but we will have better luck if I set up the meeting. Most demons don’t waste their time on humans.”

“You obviously do,” I huff.

“Only on you.” His voice drops an octave before adding, “And you will never be a waste of my time.”

Jess hops up from the couch. “Whelp, that’s my cue to leave. I need to get groceries for dinner tonight.”

“What? You’re going to leave me alone with a deranged demon?”

“No, I’m going to leave you alone with a gorgeous man who is madly obsessed with you, and who might show you a thing or two about being spanked, because clearly you’ve never experienced that.” She pats me on the arm before walking out the door, MJ following close behind. I almost forgot MJ was here. She’s been quietly avoiding us since Zarreth arrived.

“Jess!” I jump up and follow her outside. “Do you think he’s safe?”

“I think you’re safer with him than that psycho who’s been following you around.”

She has a point, even though they’re the exact same person. I have no problem throwing myself at a stalker, but I panic when he offers to help find my brother.

“Thank you. I’m sorry for acting a little crazy.” Something about Zarreth drives me absolutely insane, and it has nothing to do with him being a demon.

“Are you kidding? I would pay money to watch you throw something at Zarreth’s head again.”

“Shit. I should probably apologize, huh?”

Jess scoffs. “Hell no. Never apologize to a dude, Frankie.”

I roll my eyes, giving her a hug and patting MJ on the head before they hop in her car and drive away.

My bra and underwear are still a little damp from jumping in the lake, and it’s making my skin itchy, so I change into a pair of comfy shorts and a t-shirt before returning to the living room.

Zarreth is sitting on the couch now, playing with Ms. Kitty. He looks at me, patiently waiting for me to say something.

He must have thought I was going to throw something at him again, because he physically relaxes when I sit on the other end of the couch and grab a pillow.

“Why don’t you have horns or wings or something?”

Zarreth briefly looks away, releasing an audible exhale. “They were cut off.”

I gasp, bringing my hands to my mouth. “Oh my God. Did it hurt?” Of course it hurt, Captain Obvious.

He looks at me hesitantly before speaking. “Ask me something else.”

I feel bad for prying and my guard drops a little. I move Ms. Kitty to the other side of me so I can scoot closer to him. “Where do demons come from?”

Grabbing my wrist, he brings it to his lips and kisses it softly before interlacing his fingers with mine. “I know this is a lot to take in, but the Human Realm isn’t the only one in existence.”

I should be shocked, but at this point, nothing can surprise me.

“There are five realms that we know of. I come from the Realm of Darkened Depths, which is where most demons live. The Horde of Shadows is the only demon horde allowed to live in the Human Realm.”

I tuck my legs underneath me and turn so I’m completely sideways on the couch, facing him. “Do demons have any special abilities?”

“Aside from skipping rocks?” He gives me a boyish grin and my heart skips a beat. “All demons have heightened senses. We’re much faster and stronger than humans. We heal quickly and are basically immortal. We don’t need food, water, or sleep. Although sleep helps us regenerate faster if we’re injured.”

“Holy shit,” I mutter.

Squeezing my hand, he continues. “Older demons have magical abilities, and some can trace, which is basically like teleporting.”

“Do you have any magical abilities?”

He nods his head as a ball of fire appears before us. Its flames dance in the shape of a heart then disappear into thin air. “I’m a fire demon, so I can summon and manipulate fire. I can also trace when I’m at full strength.”

My jaw drops. I bring my hands to my mouth as I squeal. “Holy shit!”

He smiles at me, playing with the end of my braid. The magnetic pull between us forces me closer to him.

I know he feels it too because he turns us sideways, extending his legs underneath me on the couch. I straddle his waist, hoping to feel the bulge I felt earlier at the lake.

“You should probably stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” I respond, knowing I’m giving him my best flirty look.

“Like you’re imagining me naked.”

What I wouldn’t give to see him naked. To feel his hands all over my body; his tongue sliding in and out of my mouth.

Zarreth’s eyes darken as he places his hands on my hips and squeezes. “You smell delicious,” he growls.

“Um, thank you?” I swallow nervously. “Soo... How does sex work? Can demons and humans, you know, hook up or get married?”

A slow smile spreads across his face. “Are you asking me to marry you, Frankie?” he teases. “Because I would.”

I ignore the warmth rushing through my chest. “No.” I roll my eyes. “I was just asking in general.”

He chuckles. “Yes, humans and demons can have sex, but it takes a lot of self-control on the demon’s part because humans are so fragile.” His fingers trace the waistband of my shorts. “Don’t worry about me, little one. I have great self-control.”

“Good for you,” I say trying to play it cool, but I know my red face gives away how embarrassed I am thinking about how much I would love to test his statement.

His thumb rubs back and forth over my hip bone as he continues. “Demons don’t believe in something as temporary as marriage, and only a few are lucky enough to find their mate.”

“How do you know when you find your mate?”

“The only way to know for sure is through sex. The male has an uncontrollable urge to bite the female while he comes inside her. His saliva does something to her blood, forming a magical bond that can only be broken through death. Afterwards, both the male and female develop matching marks on their chests. When one of them dies, the mark fades, and soon the other will die from a broken heart.”

It sounds so tragically romantic. “Can a demon mate with a human?”

Zarreth licks his lips as he gazes intently at mine. “I don’t know. I hope so.”

I lean forward, tentatively parting my lips, feeling the heat radiating from his body. I’m so nervous, but before I can change my mind, he meets me halfway, our lips finally touching.

A shock charges through my entire body as he deepens the kiss, making me feel alive. A small whimper escapes my lips as he grips the back of my neck, holding me in place while his warm tongue swirls around mine. I can almost taste the fire that burns within him.

He growls before pulling me to his chest, turning us over, so he’s now on top, looming over me. Grabbing both sides of my face, he tilts my head and kisses me deeply, taking my breath away.

He pulls my t-shirt over my head, exposing my bare breasts. His eyes darken as they linger on my chest. Running a hand over his mouth, he shakes his head as if he's trying to focus before speaking.

“So fucking beautiful,” he growls.

I grab the edge of Zarreth's shirt and pull it over his head. He leans forward, taking my nipple in his mouth.

My hands run down his back, pausing when I feel deep, uneven ridges on his shoulder blades. “I want to see.”

Zarreth pulls back, looking at me with hesitant but open eyes, as if he would hand me the world if I asked. Warily, he turns his back toward me. I gasp. It's much worse than I imagined.

My eyes fill with tears as they roam over his mutilated shoulders. Some scars are the shiny pink color of a freshly healed cut. Others are faded like they've been there for years. My heart aches for him. Feeling the urge to undo all the harm he has endured in his life, I push myself up, taking my time as I plant kisses over each scar.

He turns to face me. He cups my face again, using his thumb to wipe away a tear. “Don't cry for me, little one. I will gladly go through worse if it means being here with you.”

He softly brushes his lips against my forehead, my eyes, the corners of my mouth. His tenderness is fleeting, quickly replaced by a sense of urgency. His kisses turn into bites; not hard enough to break skin, but hard enough to make me pull back when he sinks his teeth into my jaw.

Zarreth pushes me back, so I'm laying down again and licks his way down my neck.

He pinches my nipple, hard. Yelping, I try pushing his hand away.

“Do you want me to stop?” He flattens his tongue and swipes it across my nipple, replacing the pain with pleasure.

“N-no,” I stammer. I can handle a little pain, right? Especially when it’s mixed with pleasure.

“Good,” he growls before turning to my other nipple, clamping his teeth down.

“Ungh,” I cry out as I resist the urge to push his head away.

He moves between my breasts, licking and biting each one before leisurely making his way down my stomach. I always thought it was a myth that women could come from breast play, but now I’m beginning to believe it.

Holding me down, he bites my left hip, leaving red marks in his wake as he makes his way to my other one. He pulls my shorts down, along with my underwear, and inhales deeply.

“I’ve been wanting to do this since the day I chased you through the woods.” Running his tongue up and down my wet slit, his amber eyes never leave my green ones as I arch my back, moaning for him to keep going.

“Fuck,” he growls. “You taste better than I imagined.”

He plunges his tongue inside me while pressing the heel of his palm over my clit, rocking it, building pressure until it’s swollen, eager for more.

Spreading my thighs further apart, he devours me. His tongue flicking back and forth in a steady rhythm before biting down, sending a ripple of pain and pleasure through

my body. He slowly slides two fingers into me, curling them, massaging the perfect spot.

My hips rise to meet each thrust, riding his hand. Embarrassed, I try stopping, but I can't. Instead, I reach down and fist his hair, pressing his mouth tighter against me, smothering him between my thighs.

“Fuck yeah, baby! I want it all,” he growls.

I'm so wet I can hear the slippery sound of his fingers thrusting into me. My legs shake as waves of pleasure crash over my body, making my back arch. He continues lapping at me with his warm tongue until I scream his name, finally going limp.

Oh, my fucking God.

He chuckles, making his way to my mouth, kissing me, letting me know how I taste. “I told you; you taste like honey.”

“Holy shit,” I breathe, enjoying the tingling sensation lingering in my body.

Zarreth laughs before lying down, tucking me under his arm. I haven't felt this relaxed in, well, ever.

Zarreth

I lick my lips once more, relishing the taste of her. I think I might be developing an addiction. We turn on a movie, and Frankie soon falls asleep in my arms. Her lips are slightly parted, her soft snore putting me at ease. I love being the reason for her looking so peaceful.

I pull out my phone, texting Ronin to see if he can set up a meeting with Dante.

I know Dante can't help us with Nate, but maybe he knows something about the hell-humans running around.

Not even a minute goes by before Ronin calls. "You have a meeting already?" I whisper.

"Why the fuck are you whispering, man?" Ronin says.

"Don't fucking worry about it."

"Are you doing your freaky stalker shit again? Dude, if she's your mate, you're going to scare her away."

"Why are you calling?" I whisper-shout.

"Dante called. He's having a little get-together tomorrow night, and we're invited. He said to bring the halfling."

Fuck! He knows about Frankie. I'm sure he saw it the minute we decided to set up the meeting. I don't know exactly how his abilities work, but Dante can see the future based on the choices others make.

He's one of the oldest demons alive and is extremely powerful. No one really knows where he stands, but he treats his horde better than most overlords do.

"Do you think he wants Frankie?"

"Does anyone know what Dante wants?" Ronin asks pointedly.

"You got a point." Dante is a little eccentric, making it difficult to know his motives. "Looks like we're going to a party," I huff before disconnecting the phone. I can't imagine what Dante's get-togethers are like. Frankie is not ready for this.

"I owe you a new shirt." Frankie's sleepy voice pulls me from my thoughts.

Lifting her head, she rubs her mouth with the back of her hand. How the hell does she manage to look so cute with drool dried to her cheek? I must have it pretty bad.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I look at the wet spot on my chest. "This is my new favorite shirt."

She blushes. "So, I didn't get a chance to return the favor before I fell asleep."

"You did me a favor by letting me eat your sweet pussy."

Her eyes widen as her cheeks turn red. I love watching her reaction to my crude language.

"Oh my God, Zarreth! You can't say stuff like that!" she screeches.

I can smell how much she secretly likes it. “Why not?”

She hides her face with her hands. “Because it’s embarrassing.”

I pull her hands away, pressing my lips to her palms. “You never need to be embarrassed around me.”

“I can’t help it.” She smiles sweetly before kissing me on the cheek. “I’m going to take a shower and wash the lake water from my hair.”

Hopping off my lap, she looks at me like she’s debating saying something else. Finally, she stammers, “um, you can wait for me here or something if you want. Or, like, I don’t know, maybe you could...” She covers her red face with her hands again, struggling to find words. I know she wants to invite me to shower with her, but I don’t say anything. I’m enjoying this too much. “I’m just going to be in there.” She blurts out, pointing toward the bathroom before quickly turning on her heels and heading down the hall.

I chuckle when I hear the door close. I’ve been doing that a lot lately. I don’t ever remember feeling this content before.

A framed photo of an older man with his arms around Nate and Frankie sits on the side table. Picking it up, I study young Frankie with bare feet and a missing tooth. They’re standing in front of a run-down trailer house. I wonder if the man in the photo is Grandpa G. I smile to myself. Only Frankie would name a plant.

I hear the shower running and figure I gave her enough time to regain her bearings, so I decide to join her. When I open the bathroom door, I’m immediately greeted with the fresh scent of lavender. I smile when I see the shower curtain. It has the words ‘are you pooping?’ printed on it with cat faces peering at me.

I quickly strip before entering the steamy shower. Frankie wipes water from her eyes. “Hi,” she says, shyly.

I slowly take in her perfect body. “Fuck.” Her full breasts and round hips are screaming to be licked again. Her neatly trimmed pubic hair is just long enough to be pulled.

Her eyes widen as she nervously asks, “Why do your eyes turn black like that?”

I rest my hands on her hips. “They change color with emotion, and I’m very turned on right now.”

Wrapping her arms around my neck, she looks down at my erection. “So am I,” she breathes.

She runs her hands through my hair and freezes when she feels the nubs where my horns once were.

“Does it hurt?” She gently strokes them, nearly bringing me to my knees.

“No,” I respond. “Quite the opposite. It feels amazing.” Touching a demon’s horns is almost as arousing as touching their cock.

Biting her lower lip, she continues to explore them. A hint of magic emanates from her palms, causing my scalp to tingle. The type of powers Frankie is supposed to possess are rumored to be very dark, so I’m surprised when pure ecstasy courses through my body instead of pain.

My erection hardens, and I swear my horns grow a little. I don’t want to embarrass myself, so I pull my head away before I come without meaning to.

I lift Frankie up as she wraps her legs around my waist. She begins moving her hips, sliding the folds of her pussy up and down my shaft. Wrapping my mouth around her nipple, I suck hard, making her moan. I almost enter her right then.

“Fuck, I want to be inside you so badly.” I set her down, taking a step back. “But not yet.” I can’t fuck her no matter how much I want to. I won’t take advantage of her right now.

When a demon goes through the change, their senses become more heightened, making their sex drive go through the roof. When she’s coming on my dick, it won’t be because she’s desperate to take the edge off. It’ll be because she can’t live without me inside her.

“Please, Zarreth.” She drops to her knees, grabbing my cock with both hands. She looks up at me; her big green eyes glowing with arousal. Her little pink tongue slowly licks pre-cum off my tip.

“Frankie, I won’t be able to control myself. We should stop.”

“Please, I need you,” she begs before taking me into her mouth, swirling her tongue around the head of my cock.

Oh fuck!

Holding my dick in her hands, she runs her wet tongue down my shaft, covering it in saliva before sucking on my balls. “That feels so fucking good.”

She runs her tongue up the other side of my cock before wrapping her lips around it once again, taking in as much length as she can manage. Her hands grip what doesn’t fit in her mouth, and she begins bobbing her head up and down as she sucks, hollowing out her cheeks.

“You’re doing so good, baby.”

She moans at my praise, sucking harder. Her nails dig into my ass, pulling me deeper down her throat.

“Oh fuck,” I growl as I grab both sides of her head and thrust. She gags when I hit the back of her throat, making it difficult for her to breathe. Her teeth scrape against my cock as her jaw becomes more and more sore, but I keep going.

I don’t stop fucking her mouth until tears and saliva run down her beautiful face. My balls tighten. I debate pulling out and coming on her tits, but I can’t. It feels too good. My head falls back, moaning as my cum spills into her mouth.

Frankie gasps for air when I pull my cock away from her red, swollen lips. Her eyes glow a beautiful emerald green. She has never looked more perfect than she does right now.

I pull her to her feet, bending down to taste myself on her mouth. “Are you okay?”

She looks down, biting her bottom lip. “I really liked that. I didn’t expect your cum to taste so good.”

Her words make me instantly hard again. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

I wrap her in a towel, covering her naked body so I don’t bend her over and fuck her from behind. Instead, I dry myself off and carry her to her bedroom.

She giggles as I throw her on the bed. I lift her left foot, kissing her toes as she tries pulling away. Tightening my grip, I make my way up her leg when the front door crashes open.

“I’ve been calling you guys. I could use some help carrying the groceries in,” Jess yells.

Growling, I rest my head on Frankie’s stomach.

“Shit,” she swears, hopping off the bed. “She has the worst timing.”

“Be right there,” Frankie yells, bending over to pick up her robe, providing the perfect opportunity to spank her ass. She gives me a devilish smile. “To be continued.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” She winks at me before leaving the bedroom to find Jess.

A squeal comes from the other room. “Did you just get out of the shower? Where’s Zarreth? Holy shit! You finally did it! How was it? I bet demons have enormous dicks. How are you still walking?”

I smile to myself when Frankie hushes her. “Girl, I will give you details later. He has super hearing, remember?”

An hour later all three of us are sitting at the table—Frankie and Jess with their chicken parmesan.

“So, what are the chances this get-together is just a book club, and nothing nefarious?” Jess asks.

Frankie almost chokes on a bite of food. “What do you mean nothing nefarious ? We’re in the same book club. Trust me, they’re nefarious.”

“I’m just worried.” Jess moves the chicken parmesan around her plate. “Will you at least take Nate’s gun with you?”

It makes me feel better knowing there's a gun in the house, even though it won't work on demons. At least she can protect herself against humanity. Humans treat their own kind worse than demons do. "A gun won't work on a demon. You might as well leave it behind."

"Well, what the hell does kill a demon?" Frankie asks.

I shake my head. "It's nearly impossible, but it can be done. All demons will die if beheaded, and hellhound poison can kill us."

Jess slouches in defeat. "Well shit. That won't help us any."

I look Frankie dead in the eyes. "Promise me when I say it's time to leave, you'll listen and not put up a fight."

"I will," she says. "I'm not looking to become a late-night snack. I only want to see if anyone knows something about Nate, then we can bounce."

"I'm staying here tonight," Jess declares. "If it's your last night on Earth, I'm not leaving your side."

"See, that's the spirit," Frankie replies. "Zarreth, will you stay here tonight as well?"

She's lost her mind if she thinks I'm sleeping anywhere else tonight. "I'd do anything for you, remember?"

"Awe, well aren't you two cute?" Jess throws a piece of garlic bread at Frankie. It bounces off her head, onto the floor. Ms. Kitty swats at it, chasing it around the kitchen.

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Zarreth

“Put on your dancing shoes, it’s a little bigger than a small get-together,” Ronin says when I answer his call.

I’m standing in Frankie’s driveway leaning against the Jeep. Jess left early this morning, and I spent the day counting how many times I could make Frankie come. “I figured Dante wasn’t capable of doing anything small. Who’s all there? Anyone we need to worry about?”

“Fucking Cronus is here. I don’t recognize anyone else.”

I hate Cronus. Before Ronin and I were captured, we did some reconnaissance for Dante whenever he had issues with his horde and needed someone they wouldn’t recognize to do some cleanup. Cronus was always a sneaky son of a bitch who can’t be trusted.

“Okay. We’ll be there in about an hour.” I end the call, slipping the phone into my pocket.

Frankie’s standing next to me wearing a pair of ripped jeans that perfectly hug her ass and a tight pink t-shirt that shows off a sliver of her sexy stomach. “I’m nervous. How bad is this going to be that we had to send Ronin ahead to scope things out for us?”

I grab her jaw, pulling her mouth toward mine. “Don’t be scared, little one,” I say before devouring her lips.

She mumbles against my mouth, “I feel like you’re trying to distract me, and it’s working.”

I bite her bottom lip before opening the door, watching Frankie crawl into the passenger’s seat. I quickly shut the door before I devour her again.

“Ronin is a shadow demon. It’s in his blood to always be on the lookout. He scopes out his location a head of time no matter where he’s going,” I explain after sliding into the driver’s seat. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Just stay by my side and try not to bring attention to yourself.”

“I can do that. I’m good at keeping a low profile.”

I smile as I put the Jeep in drive, knowing what I’m about to say next will make her freak out. “You can’t help it, Frankie. You smell different.”

“What! What do you mean I smell different?” She lifts her arm and sniffs. “I stink?”

I laugh. “Trust me, Melita . You do not stink. Most beings have a specific scent. Your scent is a little different is all.”

“Different from what? Different from other humans?” She panics.

I reach over, resting my hand on her thigh. “You smell sweeter. It’s not a bad thing, but other demons will notice it. We need to avoid unwanted attention the best we can.”

“Well, that’s just great.” She huffs before adding, “what does Melita mean?”

“There’s not really a direct translation to English, but Melitamelech basically means a sweet treat. I think it’s fitting. Don’t you?” I squeeze her thigh.

She blushes, scooting closer and placing her legs on each side of the stick shift so she can rest her head on my shoulder. An unfamiliar feeling creeps through my body. Contentment, I think.

We drive through a towering wrought-iron gate. I park the jeep next to a row of motorcycles. The building that lies in front of us is a gothic masterpiece. Intricate carvings adorn the black stone walls. Statues of winged demons are perched along the steeply pitched roof.

Frankie fidgets with her necklace as she gives me a nervous smile. "Let's do this."

A blue eyed, blonde-haired demon appears beside her door. He yanks her door open, bowing in a grand gesture. Confused, she looks at me as I roll my eyes. "Ronin's a little over the top."

He locks eyes with me, smirking before grabbing Frankie's hand and bringing it to his lips. "You must be the beautiful woman Zarreth's been fawning over." He inhales deeply, taking in her scent. "It's a pleasure to meet you, love."

I'm at his side before he does anything else to piss me off. I clench my fists to keep from punching my best friend in the back of his head. Why the fuck am I so jealous? Ronin flirts with everyone, but I know he isn't interested in Frankie. He's fucking lucky he likes males.

"So, are you guys going to let me out, or are we just going to hang out here all night?" Frankie asks.

We step aside, letting her exit the vehicle. She interlaces her fingers with mine, looking at me with a nervous expression. "Don't leave me alone in there."

"I wouldn't even think about it," I say as I bring her hand to my lips, replacing the

kiss Ronin left there.

Ronin flashes me an evil grin as the three of us walk toward the arched doorway. “Frankie, huh? What a beautiful name for a beautiful girl.”

If I clench my jaws any harder, my teeth will crumble.

She blushes. “My name is Frances, actually. I hate it, so I go by Frankie.”

I look at her, trying to imagine calling her Frances. It’s cute, but Frankie fits her personality better.

She gasps as we step through the threshold, entering the building. Red drapes hang from the ceiling where naked demons perform aerial acrobatics. A massive wrought iron chandelier hangs from the vaulted ceiling, windows framed by giant arches.

Demons are gathered around the stage, watching performers spin and dance in an elaborate choreography involving fire. Naked succubi with red skin walk around carrying trays of wine and demon brew.

“Oh my God,” Frankie exclaims when she sees two demons having sex on a sofa in the middle of the room. I’m glad her human ears can’t make out what’s going on in the other, more secluded rooms. Although, I would pay good money to watch her blush if she could.

“I wonder if they’re looking for a third.” Ronin nods at the naked couple and meanders toward them. He’s good at using seduction to gain intel. He may look like a playboy, but he’s always on high alert.

A succubus wearing only a loin cloth and pierced nipples walks by holding a tray of drinks. Frankie stares at her, mesmerized. Succubi are known for their beauty. It

helps lure in their victims so they can feed on their souls.

“Don’t look at them for too long. They’re more dangerous than they appear,” I say as she blinks a few times before peering up at me.

“It’s hard not to. I’ve never seen curves like that before.” She reaches for a glass of demon brew.

“You must not look in a mirror very often,” I say, quickly grabbing the demon brew from her hand and replacing it with a glass of wine. She may have a higher alcohol tolerance now that she has started the change, but the demon brew will still knock her on her ass.

“Well, if it isn’t Aradon’s favorite toy.” I suppress my growl, turning around as a burly demon with a huge scar where his left eye should be pats me on the back.

Tucking one hand in my pocket, I lean back on my heels and squeeze Frankie’s hand with the other. “Well, if it isn’t Cronus—always stirring the pot, but too much of a coward to face the heat yourself.”

His jaw clenches at my insult, but he ignores it. He looks Frankie up and down, giving her a wicked smile. I feel her body shudder in response.

I wrap my arms around her waist. “She’s mine, Cronus,” I warn, letting him know she’s off limits.

Cronus turns his gaze toward me. “Lucky you,” he says.

I bare my fangs and growl.

“Dante wants to see you.” He points to a heavy wooden door. “Go through that

stairwell. It's the first door to the right."

We walk through the door, pausing when it closes behind us. It's dark in here and I know Frankie's eyes need time to adjust. I feel her stiffen. Even in the dark, I can see the color drain from her face as her breathing turns short and choppy.

"I-I'm sorry. I'm a little claustrophobic. I need a minute." She cracks open the door, letting in some light, and stands in the doorway.

I wonder if she developed claustrophobia from being trapped in a pantry for days on end when she was a kid. I take a deep breath to dampen my anger. I can't think about her piece of shit parents right now. That will only cause her more stress.

Pressing my back to the door, I hold it open as I cup her face with my hands. "Breathe with me." Together, we mindfully inhale and exhale until her breathing returns to normal.

"I can meet with Dante alone. You'll be safe here with Ronin."

"No, please. I want to go. If Dante has any information whatsoever about my brother, I want to be there."

"I understand. Would it help if I carried you?"

"Yes, but I want to walk. I can do this." She takes a couple more deep breaths and stiffens her spine. "Okay, let's go."

I grab her hand, guiding her deeper into the stairwell. As the door closes she says, "Please don't let go of me."

I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her to me. "I will never let you go," I say,

realizing I mean every word.

Her body trembles against mine as we walk up the stairs. “We’re almost there, little one. You’re doing so good.”

I’m suddenly thankful for the lack of light, as we reach the top. Frankie doesn’t need to see the bloody, half-dead creature chained to the far wall. It’s similar to the one I destroyed in front of her and Jess. What the fuck is Dante up to?

We enter the first door on the right. It opens up to a large room with a balcony overlooking the main floor.

Dante is sitting on a red, velvet couch. His long white hair falls down his back; huge horns curl forward from both sides of his head. His gray eyes hold the wisdom of someone who has lived a thousand lives, which he has. His age makes him much more dangerous and harder to kill than an average demon.

He stands, sending the two succubi perched on his lap falling to the floor. They scramble away as Frankie gasps in shock, covering her mouth. I give her hand a gentle squeeze, silently reassuring her.

Dante picks up a staff he doesn’t need and leans on it. He likes making people underestimate him. Even bent over, he stands about six inches taller than I do.

“Zarreth! Long time, no see,” he says like we’re old friends. He holds his hand out to me, wrist limp, fingers adorned with an assortment of gems.

I take his hand, reluctantly kissing the back of it. Dante giggles like I caught him by surprise, but everyone knows this is how he likes to be greeted. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“It’s my pleasure.” He gestures to the couch across from the one he was sitting on.
“Sit, sit.”

Sitting down, I pull Frankie on my lap, staking my claim. Dante sits on his own couch, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. When he opens them, they’re black, but they quickly turn gray again as he focuses on Frankie.

“So, who do we have here?” He pats the seat next to him. “Come here, child. I want to have a look.”

I tighten my hold on Frankie, knowing he wants more than just a look. “She’s with me, Dante. You can see her fine from there.”

“Calm down, Zarreth,” he says. “I would never hurt your pretty little halfling.”

Frankie looks at me, confused. She opens her mouth to say something, but I shake my head. I can hardly believe it when she listens and closes her mouth.

“Why did you bring us here?” I ask.

Dante nods his head towards Frankie. “I knew you had questions about the halfling’s brother, and my curiosity simply got the best of me.”

Frankie’s muscles tighten when he emphasizes the word halfling, but she doesn’t mention anything about the nickname. “Y-you know about my brother?”

Dante’s eyes soften in a fake show of empathy. “I wish I had information for you, dear. I really do, but I know nothing of your brother.”

She scoffs. “So, you brought us here to gawk at me? The halfling? Why do you keep calling me that, anyway?”

I squeeze her hip, willing her to stop talking. That mouth of hers is going to get us in trouble. I knew I should have told her everything before we came here, but I didn't want to make her more nervous than she already was. Why the fuck did I think Dante would keep his mouth shut?

Dante cackles, sending shivers down my spine. He rubs his hands together. "Isn't she exquisite? Wherever did you find her, Zarreth?"

I don't want Frankie to pique his interest any more than she already has. It's best to leave now, even though we've learned nothing. "Okay, well sorry to waste your time. If we're done here, we'll be on our way."

I tap Frankie on the hip, signaling to her it's time to leave. She stands, and I follow suit.

Dante leans back, sighing dramatically. "Okay, fine. You're such a party pooper, Zarreth. You need to lighten up. I brought you here to talk about our future together. Now that you have finally escaped that monster, Aradon."

I sit back down with Frankie on my lap again. "We don't have a future together. You know I'm a Recreant through and through. I will never join your horde."

"Of course, but that doesn't mean we can't be allies. I know about Aradon's secret weapon, the one he wants to use to destroy the Human Realm. That fool should know he can't keep a secret from me."

"How do I know you won't go after the secret weapon yourself?" I'm sure he could use someone with Frankie's foretold abilities.

Dante's eyes shift to her before answering. "I have no use for said weapon, other than to prevent it from falling into Aradon's hands. I've made a comfortable life for

myself here. I need to make sure he doesn't ruin it. I know you have your own reasons for stopping him, and I figured we could help one another out."

Frankie shifts uneasily on my lap but remains silent.

"What do you need from me?" I ask.

Dante grabs a decanter of demon brew from the side table, pouring himself a glass. He then tilts it toward me in a silent offer. I shake my head.

He takes a drink and says, "The future isn't clear where Aradon is concerned. The only thing I know for sure is you and your halfling are key to stopping him." He zeros in on Frankie. "Or do you prefer the term secret weapon? I, myself, think that term is rather boring. Maybe we can come up with something more exciting to call you, like Realm Eater, perhaps."

Fuck! Anxiety claws at my chest. I did not want Frankie to find out this way.

She wrinkles her forehead. "What the hell are you talking about?" She turns to me. "Zarreth, what the hell is he talking about? What the hell is a Realm Eater?"

I glare at Dante as he gives me a knowing smile. "Oops," he says dramatically. "I didn't realize you hadn't told your mate everything yet. Please forgive me for causing any confusion."

"What's going on?" Frankie asks, panic causing her voice to raise a few octaves.

Before I can say anything, Dante stands, grabbing the decanter of demon brew from the table. "Well, I best be off. I don't want to get in the middle of a lover's quarrel." Right before he disappears, he looks at me. "Trust your instincts, Zarreth. Your mate is more powerful than you think."

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Frankie

I hop off Zarreth's lap. "What the fuck, Zarreth? Why does Dante think I'm involved with any of this?"

He reaches for my hand. "I promise I will tell you when we get out of here."

I pull my hand away, placing it on my hip. "I'm not going anywhere until you answer me."

Standing, he runs his hands through his hair. "Please, Frankie. You don't want to hear what I have to say. Let's wait until we get home where you can be more comfortable."

I raise one eyebrow, continuing to stare at him. I'm not leaving until he tells me what's going on.

He walks to the edge of the balcony and rests his elbows on the ledge, staring blankly at the fire performers. Finally, he turns back toward me. "How much do you know about your biological father?"

Why is he asking about my father? "Nothing. My mom never talked about him."

"Have you noticed anything weird happening to you lately? Increased appetite, increased sex drive, increased tolerance for alcohol?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with my dad?" God he's frustrating. I wish he

would just tell me what's going on already.

“Do you know your eyes glow when your emotions heighten? Do you ever pay attention to the impact your emotions have on those around you?”

I walk over and lean my hip against the balcony ledge, facing him. “What are you talking about? My eyes don't glow. Just tell me what's going on,” I plead.

Zarreth releases a sharp exhale. “Fuck. I'm so sorry. Your father was a demon.”

What? I take a step back. That doesn't make sense. My dad may have been a lot of things, according to my mom, but he was not a demon. Why is he making this up?

“Stop messing with me, Zarreth. I'm not in the mood.”

“Frankie.” his voice softens as he reaches for me again. “I'm not messing with you.”

I understand his words, but they don't make sense. My brain won't process them. My father couldn't have been a demon. That would mean I'm half demon.

My mind goes back to when Dante called me halfling. I think I'm going to be sick. This is too much to handle.

“I need to get out of here,” I mutter before bolting from the room.

The door closes behind me, leaving me in the dark. Oh no! I forgot about the narrow stairwell. My breathing grows more rapid. Tears gather in the corners of my eyes as my legs begin to wobble. Luckily, Zarreth is right behind me. He lifts me up, taking the stairs down two at a time as I bury my face in his neck.

He pushes the door open and sets me down. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. I want to go home,” I yell before stomping past Ronin who’s standing just a couple feet away from me.

Ronin looks at me questioningly. “Trouble in paradise?”

Zarreth answers, “Fuck off, Ronin. We’re fine. I’m taking her home.”

Ronin chuckles. “Like you have a choice.”

I storm out the door, running toward the Jeep. Zarreth and his stupid superpowers are there before I am. He opens the passenger door, waiting for me to get in. Ignoring him, I hop in the back seat.

Huffing, Zarreth crawls into the driver’s seat, and slams the door before turning to face me. “Melita?”

I stare out the window.

He tries again. “Frankie, talk to me.”

I don’t feel like talking. “Leave me alone.”

He sighs and starts the Jeep as I close my eyes, resting my head against the window. This is ridiculous. I’m not a demon, and I’m definitely not some sort of secret weapon Realm Eater.

Zarreth tries getting me to talk a few more times, but I ignore him the entire way home. I know it’s not his fault, but I need to be mad at somebody right now, and he’s conveniently here.

I check my phone to find twelve missed phone calls and twice as many messages

from Jess. I send her a text.

On our way back. It was a bust,

but we're safe. I'll update

you in the morning.

Okay, I love you. Call me

when you wake up.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I know we're parked in my driveway. Zarreth shuts off the Jeep and turns to me, looking genuinely concerned. "I'm sorry, Frankie."

My eyes burn from holding back tears. I feel so overwhelmed. Within seconds, he's helping me from the Jeep. He wraps his arms around me, letting me cry into his chest. "Why is this happening to me? What's a Realm Eater?"

Zarreth cups my face, using his thumbs to wipe away my tears. "The Realm Eater is just a made-up fairytale demons tell their young to make them listen. You're not a Realm Eater, Frankie. Dante just enjoys watching people squirm."

I pull away from him and sit on the porch. "Does that mean I might not be part demon either?"

He sits next to me and rubs his hand over my back. "You're part demon, Frankie. I wouldn't lie to you about that. I feel your magic every time I'm near you, and you don't smell human."

I feel numb. I think I'm in shock. I don't want to have this conversation, so I go inside, head straight to my bedroom, and collapse on my bed. Zarreth follows me. He helps me change into an oversized t-shirt before pulling the blankets over me.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" he asks.

I nod my head.

Without saying another word, he strips down, crawls under the blankets, and holds me.

I snuggle into his chest and inhale deeply. He smells like burning cedar. His scent relaxes me, and I quickly fall asleep in his arms.

The next thing I know, I'm dreaming of giant plants with demon horns chasing me when a guttural scream startles me awake. Shooting up, I grab my chest in a panic. Zarreth is asleep, but his face is contorted into pure agony.

"Not again! My wings." His voice cracks. I shake him gently, trying to pull him from his nightmare. "Frankie," he mumbles as he reaches for me.

"I'm right here." I position myself so his head is in my lap. His breathing returns to normal and he soon begins snoring.

I rub his horns, surprised to find they have grown since yesterday. They are dark like his hair and start just above his temples, curling backwards, close to his head. I wish I could kill the bastards who cut them off.

My mind wanders as I try not to think about my future and focus on something else instead. I think back to when Dante said I was Zarreth's mate.

I know we just met, but I can't deny the attraction between us. Closing my eyes, I rest my head on the headboard.

I continue stroking Zarreth's horns, thinking about the way he looks at me, like he can't breathe without me. Like he would do anything to protect me. Soon, I'm thinking about how good it feels when he swirls his tongue around my nipple or bites my clit.

"Honey," Zarreth mumbles, still asleep. His voice pulls me out of my trance, and I look down to see his horns have grown at least two more inches since I started touching him.

My hands are buzzing with that weird energy again, and I wonder if I'm the cause of it. It seems crazy, but weirder things have happened. You know, like finding out I'm a demon.

Looking out the window, I see the sun shining and decide to get out of bed. There's no use laying around feeling sorry for myself. That won't help anything.

I take a quick shower and blow dry my hair before dressing in a cute top and a pair of jeans. Zarreth is still sleeping, so I drive to the coffee shop, getting two coffees and a bag of donuts. I know he doesn't eat breakfast, but I will devour the entire bag by myself.

When I return, Zarreth is sitting on the couch playing with Ms. Kitty. He must have showered because his hair is wet, and he's wearing only sweatpants. I don't think I will ever get used to his sculpted chest and six pack abs. His biceps flex as he runs a hand down Ms. Kitty's back. Lucky cat.

I set the donuts on the counter before handing him a coffee. "I know you don't eat, but everyone likes coffee, right?"

He looks at me, his eyes full of distress. “Can I hold you?” He whispers, “Please.”

Woah. That nightmare must have really affected him. “Of course.”

Setting down the coffee, I straddle his lap. He wraps his arms around my waist, pressing his nose to my hair. The tension leaves his body as he inhales my scent.

I rub my hands up and down his back. His body radiates so much heat. I wonder if all demons are this warm, or if only the ones with fire abilities are.

He takes another deep breath and leans back, his hands resting on my hips. “How are you doing with everything?”

“Me? I’m good.” I’m not sure if I’m trying to convince him or myself.

He tucks a curl behind my ear. “Last night was rough, Frankie. I know you’re strong, but it’s okay to be scared or confused.”

“Honestly, I don’t know how to feel. I keep thinking, ‘ Hey, at least I’m not a racist homophobe.’ That would be way worse, right?”

He chuckles. “Well, that’s true, but we should still talk about it.”

I know I need to process this, but I don’t want to right now, so I change the subject. “Thank you for staying with me last night.”

Zarreth presses his forehead to mine. “I wouldn’t have left, anyway. I can’t seem to stay away from you.”

“Really? Have you had many girlfriends before me?” I know how pathetic I sound, but the words already left my mouth. Too late to stop them now.

“Um, well,” he stammers. I instantly regret the question and stand up. I’m so embarrassed. He chuckles, pulling me back onto his lap.

Now I’m pissed. I cross my arms, glaring at him. “You don’t have to laugh at me. I’ve never had a boyfriend longer than six months. Not like I would consider you boyfriend material anyway.”

“Frankie.” He tries keeping a straight face but fails. “I’m over six hundred years old. Even if I had one girlfriend for every decade of my life, that would be sixty girlfriends.”

I’m suddenly very nervous. How can I compete with that? I’ve only had sex with two guys. Even for a human, I’m inexperienced. There is no way I could satisfy him.

As if he can sense my insecurities rising, he holds my chin, tilting my face toward his. “Look at me.” I open my eyes. He’s no longer smiling, his expression now sincere. “You’re different. I’m drawn to you in ways I can’t understand. Every ounce of my being calls to you. I’ve never felt this way before.”

My anxiety softens and I feel dumb for being jealous. “Okay, you’re off the hook.”

He smiles, lifting my hand and kissing the inside of my palm. I love when he does that. It’s starting to become my new favorite thing.

“So, I’m not boyfriend material, huh?” he teases.

I look at him for a minute, pretending to think hard. “I don’t know. I mean, I was thinking Ronin was boyfriend material, but if he’s not available, you’ll do.”

I jump up, running away, but only make it a few steps when Zarreth grabs me from behind and pulls me against his chest.

Wrapping his hand around my throat, he places his mouth to my ear. “Do you want to repeat that, little one?” he growls.

I enunciate every word, so he hears me loud and clear. “Ronin. Is. Boyfriend. Material.”

Zarreth squeezes briefly before releasing my neck. He pulls down my pants, bending me over the couch before I realize what’s happening. “Oh Melita , you’re going to wish you never said that.”

Half the butterflies in my stomach do a happy dance while the other half hides behind one another. Shit! Maybe it’s not smart to tease a demon like that.

“Hold on to the couch cushion and do not move until you’re told,” he orders.

Taking a deep breath, I dig my fingers into the cushions. My knees tremble in anticipation.

He massages my ass cheeks with his warm hands, preparing me for what’s about to happen. “Your skin is so perfect. I can’t wait to turn it bright red.”

One hand presses into the small of my back, holding me in place, while the other pulls away, leaving only cool air in its wake. Okay, this is really happening.

Bearing down, I tighten every muscle in my body, waiting for his palm to make contact. My panties are soaked. I can’t believe I’m wet already.

“Count!” he growls.

“What do you mean, count? What am I supposed to count? The number of times I thought about Ronin last night?” I instantly regret saying that. What is wrong with

me?

A low grumble escapes Zarreth's throat. I turn my head so I can see his face. His eyes are not the black ones I expect to see. Instead, they're glowing orange and red like hot embers. I begin to shake. Oh no! I pushed him too far.

"I'm sorry. I was joking." My heart pounds against my ribcage. I take a couple deep breaths to calm down. I'm so stupid.

"Frankie, look at me," he orders.

My eyes immediately snap to his as a sense of calm washes over me. His confident presence pulls me from my thoughts before my anxiety completely takes over.

"Pull your panties down," he demands.

"What?" I ask, shocked at how intimidating his voice sounds.

"Pull your panties down, now," he says, slowly articulating each word. "Don't make me tell you again, Frankie."

I do as he says, pulling my underwear to my ankles. He bends me over the couch again.

"This will be much easier for you if you don't move." He bends down and bites my butt cheek, hard. I'm not sure if I jump because it hurts or if I jump because I'm surprised.

"Remember to count after each spanking. You owe me five. Do you understand?"

I nod my head.

“Say it,” he demands.

“I understand,” I breathe.

The next thing I know I hear a smack. It’s harder than I expected, and my left ass cheek is stinging.

“One.” My voice shakes.

“Is Ronin boyfriend material?” Zarreth asks.

He’s not seriously jealous over his best friend, is he? I want to say yes so badly, but my common sense is actually taking over for once. “Yes.” Shit! I guess my common sense left the day I invited a stalker into my house.

He chuckles. “Your smart little mouth just earned you five more.”

I hear another smack, and my right ass cheek is burning this time. This one hurts more than the first.

“Two,” I cry.

I feel his breath on my ear as he whispers, “Just tell me to stop and I will.”

The next three spankings progressively get harder. My entire ass is burning, but I feel like I might come at any minute.

“Your ass looks incredible when you’re bent over like this,” He says, causing my thighs to clench tighter as a whimper escapes my lips.

I hold my breath waiting for the next blow. Instead, Zarreth moves a finger up and

down my slit before sliding it into me. I feel myself tighten around his finger as he moves it in and out. Pressure builds in my lower stomach, my knees begin to tremble.

Smack! The next one is harder than I expected, and it takes me by surprise. I gasp, holding back a sob.

“S-six,” I stammer as a tear rolls down my cheek.

He rubs my ass. “You’re doing so good, baby.”

He spans me three more times. The only time he stops moving his fingers is when I’m close to coming.

The sensation is too much. The pain, the pleasure. My body doesn’t know how to process it. Another tear runs down my face. I catch it with my tongue, smiling when I taste how salty it is.

I prepare myself for the final slap. I’m not sure what to expect, but it isn’t to come as hard as I do when he lands the final blow.

Waves of pleasure course through my body, pulling a scream from my lips. Zarreth’s fingers continue to move in and out until the trembling stops.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he says before planting a kiss in the middle of my back. He scoops me in his arms before laying me on the couch. “I’ll be right back.”

I give him a lazy smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I can’t believe that just happened. I can’t believe I actually got spanked. Me! Jess will never believe it.

Zarreth walks back into the room. “This will help with the sting.”

He holds up the coconut oil, indicating for me to roll over. He rubs it over my tender skin, soothing the pain just like he promised. “Are you okay?”

I feel like I’ve just released the breath I have been holding my entire life. I feel alive. “Is it weird I enjoyed that?”

Chuckling, he helps me sit up. “My little freak,” he says before planting a kiss in the middle of my forehead.

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Frankie

Z arreth left to find Ronin and see if he learned anything more about the weird hell-human things roaming around.

I call the greenhouse to see if I'm needed at work this afternoon. I dread asking for another day off, but I need time to clear my head.

"Thank you for calling Grassroots. How may I help you?" I almost drop the phone, shocked at how professional the voice on the other end sounds.

"Um, is Dave there?" I ask, recognizing the voice, but not being able to place it.

"Is this you, Frankie? It's me, Carol." What the hell is Ms. Anderson doing answering the phone? I thought Dave didn't like her.

"Ms. Anderson?" I ask, confused.

"Yes, it's me dear! Dave told me about your brother, and he was struggling with the cash register so I told him I would help until you were ready to return."

That woman really is a godsend. "You don't know how much that means to me. Can you tell Dave I will call him later with an update?"

"Take all the time you need, honey. I'll take care of Dave. He's really just a big teddy bear, you know." Her voice almost sounds whimsical.

“Um, sure.” What is happening? Has the whole world gone mad? “Thank you,” I add before disconnecting.

I call Jess next. “Finally!” she wails into the phone. “I’ve been worried sick about you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier. A lot happened last night, and I needed time to process it. Can you come over?”

“Be there in ten,” she replies before disconnecting the call.

She works as an independent computer geek. I don’t know exactly what she does, but she must be good at it because she makes a decent amount of money and gets to be picky about her clients and her hours.

Exactly ten minutes later, Jess is standing in my living room peering down the hall where my bedroom is located. “I’m surprised Toddy McHotty isn’t here.”

Tears form in my eyes as she walks over to give me a hug before sitting next to me on the couch. “What did he do? I’ll kick his ass, demon or not,” she threatens.

I laugh at the image of my best friend trying to beat up a seven-foot demon. “It’s not Zarreth. He’s great. Amazing, really.”

The stupid grin on my face disappears as I prepare myself to tell my best friend I’m a demon. “I have something crazy to tell you and you won’t believe me.”

I tell her everything. I tell her about Ronin and the succubi with red skin. I tell her about meeting Dante and him not knowing anything about my brother. And I finally tell her my real dad was a demon, and I may be a secret weapon who could destroy the world.

I stay quiet while she processes everything. I shouldn't be nervous. Jess is more than a sister, and she's always accepted me. "Say something."

"So, this Ronin." She looks at me seriously. "Is he hot?"

I pick up a couch pillow, throwing it at her. "This is serious, Jess."

She catches the pillow and sets it on her lap. "I know. I just...I don't know what to say. I can't imagine how scared you must be, but you know you're still you, right? You'll always be the sweet, funny, stubborn, pain in the ass you've always been. That's not gonna change."

Her words wrap around me like a hug. For the first time since discovering I'm part demon, I feel a flicker of hope. Maybe I can still be the girl who makes stupid jokes and dances in the rain. Maybe I can find a way to navigate this new reality without losing who I am. I can do this with Jess by my side.

I scoot closer, wrapping my arms around her. I can't imagine my life without my best friend. "I love you, Jess."

She squeezes me back. "I love you too. We're in this together. No matter what happens, you won't be alone."

We pull apart from the embrace as I wipe my eyes. I take a cleansing breath, a small weight lifting from my shoulders. "I could really go for some weed right about now."

She laughs. "See, I told you you're the same person, you little pothead—it just so happens I have some with me."

Dashing from the room, she returns holding a joint. Just looking at it relaxes me a little.

Jess sits cross-legged on the couch and hits the joint before passing it to me. “Now tell me about you and Zarreth? Is he a good kisser? Have you done it yet? Does he have spikes on his dick or anything cool like that?”

This little bit of normalcy is exactly what I need. We spend the rest of the afternoon smoking weed and gossiping about Zarreth and Brent. She tells me she wouldn’t mind hooking up with Brent when he comes around, but she isn’t going to wait for him. She says she’s in her hoe-era and can’t be tied down.

Zarreth returns to find us sprawled on the couch eating potato chips, singing Doing Time by Sublime.

We notice him at the same time and say, “The Toddinaterrrr,” dragging out his nickname before giggling uncontrollably.

We finally pull ourselves together long enough to notice a tall blonde standing next to Zarreth. His hair is peeking out from under his hat, his eyes a startling shade of blue. He flashes us a great smile. If I didn’t know he was a demon, I would think he belonged on a surfboard.

“Who’s the surfer?” Jess points to Ronin, her eyes roaming over his toned body.

Ronin walks over to Jess as he grabs her hand, bringing it to his lips. “You can call me Ronin.”

“Yeah, because that’s your name, dumbass,” Zarreth tells him.

Jess scoots over, patting the couch cushion between us. “You can call me Jessica.”

Ronin squeezes his massive body between ours and sits. I don’t know why I find it so funny, but I laugh until I snort.

Zarreth walks over to me and bends down, brushing his lips against mine. “It’s nice to see you laughing,” he says before sitting in the recliner next to the couch.

“I think my brain is broken. I tend to laugh during stressful situations. It’s either that or have a nervous breakdown,” I say.

Jess speaks up. “Alright, I’m just going to ask because Frankie never will. What’s going to happen to her?”

I guess there’s no more living in denial. I look at Zarreth, anxiously waiting for him to answer.

“I’ve never met someone who’s half demon before, but for full blooded demons, it can take years for them to complete the change, coming into their powers. It’s like puberty for humans. It’s different for everyone,” Zarreth says.

The mention of puberty makes me think back to when I would tease Nate every time his voice cracked. Could Nate also be part demon? It would make sense being we share the same blood. “What if Nate is also half-demon? He must have the same abilities I do. What if Aradon has him?”

“I don’t think so.” Zarreth shakes his head. “Your brother is older than you, right? So, you would have at least seen his eyes glow by now if he were part demon.”

Relief floods through me. Nate didn’t show any signs of the change before he went missing. I would have noticed. At least I can find peace in knowing Aradon isn’t interested in him.

“I still don’t understand why Aradon would want me. I’m sure there’s a full-blooded demon out there stronger than I am. I bet there’s one who can even open a jar of pickles without struggling.”

Zarreth looks at Ronin, who answers, “There’s a prophecy from long ago about a half-blooded demon who would possess the power to destroy entire realms. The prophecy has been long forgotten. It was simply turned into a nursery rhyme to make young demons behave. But years ago, Aradon hired a seer who predicted the half-breed would be born in the twenty-first century.”

“But why does Aradon believe I’m the half-breed he wants? Why me?”

Zarreth answers, “Half-blooded demons are very rare. I have never met one before. Also, your eyes glow green when you use your magic. Only the deviants had eyes that glow like yours, and they were extinct years ago.”

“So basically, on top of being a demon, I’m a freak of nature.” I puff out my cheeks as I exhale. “Great.”

“How did they go extinct?” Jess asks.

“Ah, well...” Zarreth stalls.

Ronin interrupts. “They were slaughtered centuries ago because they possessed a death touch, making them extremely dangerous. But the powerful ones could kill using only their mind.”

Oh my God! My mind flashes back to the guy I pushed off me at the bar. I guess I really was the reason his eyes bled. “So, once I finish demon puberty, I’ll be walking around randomly killing everything I touch until I figure out how to control my abilities? This is so fucked up.”

“Maybe it will be like Elixir from the Xavier Institute,” Jess says. “He could also heal things.”

Zarreth chimes in. “I have no idea who you’re talking about, but if Elixir can cure viruses, mend broken bones, boost abilities, or cleanse a body of poisons, then yeah, I guess.”

He moves so he’s kneeling in front of me, taking my hands in his. “Your abilities will be triggered by your emotions. You’re not an evil person. I’ll teach you how to control your magic and you’ll be using it for good in no time.”

“What if Aradon finds me?” I ask.

Standing, Zarreth pulls me into his arms. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“We all got you, Frankie,” Jess says as she hugs me from the other side.

“I got you too, Frankie,” Ronin says. “Zarreth is my closest friend. I would die for him, and I would die for his mate as well.”

I close my eyes, basking in all the love surrounding me. I have no idea how I would manage without my friends.

I spend the rest of the day processing the fact that I’m being hunted by a demon who wants to use me to destroy realms when a thought pops in my head.

“Why did Dante let me walk away? He can see the future, right? He must know what I’m capable of.” I rinse my toothbrush, placing it back in its holder.

Zarreth comes up behind me, nibbling the side of my neck. He grabs both hands and firmly places them on the countertop. We can’t seem to keep our hands off each other.

“No one knows why Dante does what he does.” Lifting the back of my shirt, he grabs

my hips and kisses his way down my spine. “He must see something that benefits him by letting you go. I’m sure he didn’t do it out of the goodness of his heart.”

“So, we don’t have to worry about Dante for now, right?” I moan.

“I don’t think he’s an immediate threat, but I wouldn’t write him off. He might not be as evil as Aradon, but he is unpredictable and will stop at nothing to get what he wants.”

“Great,” I say sarcastically.

“Right now, all you have to worry about is watching yourself in the mirror so you can see your eyes glow when you come.” He slides his fingers into my panties, finding my clit.

And like that, all my worries are gone. At least for now.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

We came close to having sex more times than I can count last night, but somehow Zarreth found the willpower to stop us every single time. He wants to give me time to adjust to being half demon without having to adjust to being mated as well.

I don't know how much longer we can resist one another, though, and to be honest, the thought of being his mate makes me feel content. He feels like home to me.

Zarreth is laying in my bed, watching me read. "Come here." He reaches his hand out toward me.

Thankfully, the chair I'm sitting in is beyond his reach. I'm wearing nothing but his t-shirt and a pair of fuzzy socks. "No way," I giggle. "I need a break. I didn't know a person could come so many times."

"Oh, little one. Just wait until I fuck you," he says, making me blush again.

You would think I'd be used to him by now, but he still catches me off guard when he says stuff like that. I'm not used to people being so attracted to me.

I nibble on my bottom lip, imagining how it would feel to have him inside me.

"Okay, you're right." He crawls out of bed. "We have to get out of this room, or we'll quickly find out if we're mates or not."

Thanks to Ms. Anderson, I was able to take the week off from work. I'm not ready to

act like everything is normal around my coworkers. I need time to process everything. That's what I told myself anyway. I really took the week off because I can't get enough of Zarreth.

I set my book down. "Good idea. I'm starving anyway."

"Let's get you fed and start training."

"It's not working!" I gently caress the broken stem of the flower I'm trying to mend. My powers are tied to emotion. I know anger evokes a darkness within me. Chad number one can attest to that. But I need to see if I can use my powers for good. I don't know if I can live with myself if all I do is cause destruction.

I'm sitting cross-legged, in the middle of a field, not too far from Beauty Lake. The wilted flower shows no interest in mending itself, no matter how many happy thoughts I think.

"You're overthinking it. I have watched Grandpa G's leaves perk up just by being close to you. I know you can do it. We just need to get your mind off it."

"That's easier said than done," I huff.

Zarreth moves so he's sitting behind me. "Close your eyes."

I rest my head against his chest, closing my eyes. I relax my arms beside me while still holding the flower in one hand. He begins massaging my scalp with his fingers.

"I didn't know a head massage could feel so nice."

He kisses the top of my head. "Shh."

His hands travel down the side of my neck to my shoulders, kneading my muscle, instantly making me more relaxed.

“You should do this more often.” I lean forward, looking over my shoulder at him.

“Melita, close your pretty mouth and relax.”

I smile to myself before closing my eyes, leaning back against his chest once more.

His hands roam over my collar bone; his fingers grazing the tops of my breasts. He slides his hands up and down my ribcage.

It amazes me how much comfort Zarreth brings despite the craziness happening in my life. He’s like an anchor, tethering me to safety, making sure I don’t float away. I feel secure with him. He gives me the stability and reassurance I so desperately need right now.

I feel his breath against my ear. “Open your eyes,” he whispers, pulling me from my thoughts.

I open my eyes, looking at the flower in my hand. It not only mended itself, but it grew an inch taller.

“Oh my God!” I squeal. “I did it!” Relief rushes through me as I realize my powers are not only dark and evil, but I can use them for good as well.

Now all I have to do is be happy for the rest of my life. That should be easy enough, right?

“I knew you could do it.” Zarreth squeezes me tightly, pride bursting through my chest at his words. “You’ll be practicing on small animals in no time. Imagine all the

little critters you'll save." He chuckles.

I turn my body around, so I'm facing him. "I wish Nate were here. One time when we were kids, we found a dead squirrel. I was convinced I could bring it back to life. I did little chest compressions and everything." I pause, reflecting on how sweet Nate was. He knew the squirrel was dead, but he was patient, letting me try to revive him until I was convinced the squirrel wasn't coming back.

"When I eventually accepted the fact that the squirrel was dead, Nate helped me put on a funeral for it. He even made me a little coffin out of scrap wood and old rusty nails. If only he could see me now."

"I have no doubt he would be proud of you," Zarreth says.

I struggle to hold back the tears. He's right. Nate would be proud of me. He was my biggest supporter. "I have to find him, Zarreth. I won't move on with my life until I do. He is the only person who has ever been there for me through thick and thin no matter what. He is the most important thing in my life. I need to find him."

Zarreth lifts my hand, bringing my palms to his lips. "We will, Melita."

It occurs to me I know nothing about his family. I've been so busy thinking about myself that I haven't even bothered to ask. "Do you have any siblings?"

"I was an only child, but Ronin and I grew up together. We're practically brothers," he says.

I bet they were a handful. "How did your parents keep their sanity with you and Ronin being together all the time? I can't imagine the trouble you two caused."

He gives me a devilish grin. "I don't know what you mean. We were angels."

“Tell me about your childhood. What’s it like where you’re from?”

He bends his knees, resting his elbows on them. His eyes grow distant before he speaks. “The Dark Realm is much different from here. The sky is so hazy you can’t make out the peaks of the black, ash-covered mountains. Fire burns all around, making the sky glow a fiery red. Rivers of molten lava snake throughout the land.

“The Recreants live in a small village surrounded by obsidian mountains. A spring of hot water resides in the middle of the village. Between the spring and a little magic, we have enough food to feed our young.

“The horde works together like a family. The children play together while the adults work together. At night, we gather around the spring to share stories and play music.

“It’s a simple life. It could almost be a good one if it wasn’t for Aradon and the Death Horde. Once a month they would raid our village, leaving behind dead demons and only the food we managed to hide.

“We finally rebelled, but our army was too small. After years of war, Aradon agreed to leave The Recreants in peace in exchange for the freedom of Ronin, myself, and three other demons. I know there’s a chance he didn’t keep his word, but it was the only choice we had.”

I couldn’t imagine sacrificing my freedom for the greater good. I like to think I would make the same decision, but I don’t know if I would. “I’m sorry, Zarreth. Your horde is so lucky to have you.”

He stands, letting me know the conversation is over. He reaches his hand out to me. “Alright, get up.”

“Does everyone do what you tell them to?” I grab his hand so he can pull me up.

“Everyone except you and Ronin.” Zarreth slaps my ass, making me giggle. “Are you ready to learn how to throw a punch?”

“Hell yeah!” I say with a big grin on my face.

“Stand with your left foot forward.” He shows me how to properly stand and make a fist.

I practice a simple one-two punch combo, secretly pretending I’m Ronda Rousey. Tomorrow, we start practicing with weapons.

It only takes about ten minutes for sweat to drip down my forehead. I have worked my way up to a jab, cross, hook, cross sequence. My shoulders are burning, but I love it. Every time my fist connects with Zarreth’s palm, a rush goes through my body.

Just as I’m about to give him the biggest hook I can muster, he grabs me, pushing me behind him. A second later a screech comes from the woods, making my skin crawl.

A startled rabbit dashes from the trees, followed closely by a naked man.

The man is foaming at the mouth. Dark veins spread throughout his pale body like a roadmap. He snarls, snapping at the bunny, fangs dripping with saliva.

I scream and clench Zarreth’s shirt, watching the hell-human tear into the bunny, turning its white fur a bright crimson red.

“Another hell-human? Fucking Dante,” Zarreth says. “Baby, I’m gonna need you to release your death grip so I can take care of this thing.”

As soon as he finishes his sentence the hell-human looks up, focusing his red beady eyes on us. He snarls and runs in our direction, leaving his prey behind.

I let go of Zarreth's shirt and within a second, he's in front of the hell-human. He quickly rips his head off, as if he were merely popping the head of a dandelion off its stem.

I run to the bunny and sink next to it. I place my hands over its bleeding throat, trying to summon my power, but nothing happens. No tingling sensation, no lightheadedness, nothing. I rub my bloody hands together, trying again but have no luck.

I think back to the squirrel I tried saving as a child. My heart hurts. I want my brother so badly right now. I want him to build a little casket for the bunny, making everything better like he did when we were kids.

Zarreth removes his shirt, using it to wipe the blood from my hands.

I look at him. "I need my brother. I can't live without him."

He gently brushes his lips against my temple. "I know, baby. I know."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

“Fuck!” I punch the hood of the Jeep, creating a dent. I dropped Frankie off at home, telling her I needed to grab a few things from my place. I had to get away from her. I don’t deserve the way she looks at me, like I hung the fucking moon.

I can’t lie to her anymore. I need to come clean.

I grab some clothes, hop back in the Jeep, and call Ronin. “I’m telling Frankie about Nate. It’s killing me to fucking lie to her.”

“You can’t deny she’s your mate,” Ronin says. “Why haven’t you claimed her yet?”

“Trust me. I fucking want to, but she needs to know the truth first. I don’t want any lies between us.”

“You know it’s going to happen, so you might as well do it sooner rather than later. You’ll both be stronger, and we need every advantage possible when Aradon comes looking for her.”

Fuck. I know he’s right. “It’s probably pointless to think about anyway. Once she finds out I’ve been lying to her, she’ll never speak to me again.”

“Dude, you see the way she looks at you. She’s going to be pissed, but she’ll get over it.”

“You don’t know how stubborn she is.”

After hanging up with him, I call Frankie to see if she's eaten yet. Maybe if I feed her, she'll be more understanding.

I return with a cheeseburger and the homemade fries she likes from The Tavern.

She runs up, planting a kiss on my cheek before grabbing the food from my hands and plopping on the couch. "So, don't demons eat? Because I feel dumb always wolfing down food in front of you."

"We can eat. We just don't need to." I sit next to her, popping a fry in my mouth. "You have a large appetite because of the change. It's a good thing. You want to be as physically strong as possible when your body stops aging."

Frankie flexes her biceps. "I can definitely use some more muscle."

I can't handle how cute she is. I wonder if she'll grow horns.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asks.

"I'm imagining how cute you'll be if you grow horns."

"Ugh." She frowns, smoothing a hand over her curls. "My hair is already uncontrollable. I can't imagine what I'd look like with horns."

"Sexy."

Frankie looks down, her cheeks flushed. She looks like she wants to say something but holds back.

"What is it?" I ask.

She covers her face with her hands, peeking at me through her fingers. “It’s embarrassing.”

“You painted my fingernails and dressed me like a merman. Nothing you say can be more embarrassing than that.”

She giggles. “I was wondering what the mating process is like. You said the male bites the female, but what does the female do? How do you know when to do the biting?”

“Sounds like you’ve given this some thought while I was gone.”

She blushes again, instantly turning me on. “Honestly, that’s all I think about.”

“Me too. You’re all I ever think about.” I don’t know why she looks so surprised. “I’ve never mated, obviously. But apparently your body knows what to do because it’s fated.”

“Do you think you and I are fated?” she asks shyly.

“I hope so, Frankie. I can’t imagine living an eternity without you. I hated being away from you for a few hours today. You make me feel things I didn’t know were possible.”

She takes her last bite of food before turning to me. “I hope we are too.”

“You can’t say things like that to me,” I growl. “You don’t know what those words do to me.”

“I mean it, Zarreth! We haven’t known each other long, but it doesn’t matter. We have been through so much together, and I know how I feel about you. I’ve known it

since day one. I've just been afraid to say it."

"Melita, don't say it unless you absolutely mean it," I warn. "You don't know what goes through my head when I'm near you. What your giggle does to me when I know I'm the reason for it. How hard I struggle to keep myself from ripping your clothes off when you put your hands on your hips, sassing back to me. Or when you start smelling like warm honey, like you do now."

I hold Frankie's stare, warning her. "If you say those words, I won't hold back. I'll fuck you, and you know what that means."

"It means we could be mates." She straddles my lap, putting her arms around my neck. Her lips softly graze my ear. "Zarreth, I love you," she says in a breathy voice, flooding me with need as my cock hardens.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

I watch his Adam's apple move up and down as he swallows, his shoulders tensing beneath my hands. My chest tightens, waiting for him to process those three words.

Is it possible he was thinking of a different set of words? Did I say the wrong thing?

Finally, Zarreth lifts me off his lap, carrying me toward the bedroom. Laying me on the bed, he takes a step back, running his fingers through his hair. "Are you sure about this? It's not too late to change your mind."

Why is he asking me this? Is he the one changing his mind? Just as doubt creeps in, I look into his tender gaze. The warmth in his eyes gives me the courage to say it again.

"I love you," I breathe.

He closes his eyes like he's savoring the moment. "Say it again, Frankie."

My voice trembles with anticipation. "I love you, Zarreth."

He walks over, taking my hand in his, pulling me up, so I'm kneeling on the bed. With his eyes burning into mine, he asks, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," I whisper, barely able to contain my emotions.

And with that, Zarreth unleashes what little control he has left. Gripping my jaw, he

pulls me toward him, catching me by surprise. His warm mouth is instantly on mine as I surrender to the moment.

I moan as he sucks on my tongue before biting my lower lip. My nails sink into his back, pulling him closer, allowing me to feel the heat radiating off his body.

He grabs a fistful of hair and pulls, tilting my head back, exposing my throat. He trails his tongue down my neck before gripping the collar of my shirt, tearing it apart. The ripped fabric lands on the floor, along with my bra.

He inhales sharply, taking in my breasts. His eyes flicker from pitch black to glowing amber. The bulge in his pants grows larger as the word 'beautiful' escapes his lips. It's so quiet I'm not sure if I'm meant to hear it.

I lay back on the bed as Zarreth pulls my jeans off, leaving me in a white thong. His tongue runs over my hips and thighs, driving me absolutely wild, exploring every inch of my body except where I desperately need him most.

Why is he taking his time torturing me? Bucking my hips toward his mouth, my body trembles with need.

He gives me a wicked smile. "So impatient," he teases before biting my hip.

He slowly works his way toward my breasts, grazing his teeth over my flesh, making me cry out with each bite. The anticipation of waiting for those sudden sharp stings makes me wet.

He continues nipping at me as his hand wraps around my neck and squeezes, making it difficult to breathe. I panic trying to pull his hand away, even though a rush of exhilaration moves through my body. He loosens his grip. No! Don't stop!

“Please,” I beg, needing the thrill. “I want this.”

Smirking, he brings his hands back to my throat, giving me what I so desperately crave. His fingers tighten, cutting off my air, as he takes my nipple into his mouth, sucking hard. Black spots swarm my vision; my pulse races. What if he doesn’t let go in time? I pull at his hands again, but instead of releasing me, he sinks his teeth into my nipple. Oh my God. My legs begin to quiver, fiery need building between them.

Zarreth finally releases his grip sending blood rushing back to my head as waves of pleasure crash over me like a storm. My short, ragged breaths turn to moans as everything blurs, leaving an overwhelming sensation of euphoria.

I’m still shaking from the orgasm as Zarreth continues teasing me, giving me no chance to recover. Again, he touches me everywhere, except where I want it most, his mouth barely brushing against my wet panties as he moves from one thigh to the other.

“Please, Zarreth, touch me.” I’m so turned on, already heading toward another orgasm.

“I am touching you,” he taunts, licking his lips. Damnit, I need that mouth on me.

“You know what I mean,” I say in frustration, trying to push my hips up.

A grin spreads across his face. “I need you to say it.”

I’m too embarrassed to voice what I need, but his mouth is mere inches from where I want him, and I feel like I might die if he doesn’t give in.

“Touch between my legs.” I nibble my lower lip, hoping my words are enough to make him give in. Instead, he stands, moves the chair in the corner of my room next

to my bed, and sits back.

No, come back! What is he doing?

“Take your panties off,” he orders. “And spread your legs wide for me. I want to see what’s mine.”

My face heats with embarrassment, but I do as I’m told, putting myself on full display. I’m so humiliated. No one has ever seen me quite this exposed before.

He zeroes in on my most private parts like a predator zoning in on his prey. His gaze is so intense, I lose my nerve and press my thighs together.

“Keep your legs open, Frankie,” he growls, taking his shirt off and undoing his jeans. “I won’t tell you again.”

Whimpering, I spread my legs once more. How can I be so mortified and turned on at the same time?

Zarreth’s eyes fill with lust as he takes me in, making me feel like Aphrodite. I start to relax, knowing I’m responsible for that look.

“You’re so fucking perfect, Frankie. Tell me this perfect pussy is mine.”

I can’t say that! I’ve never been good at dirty talk. “I-I’m yours,” I stutter nervously.

The corner of his mouth briefly tips up. “You will always be mine, little one, but right now I’m talking about your pussy.”

My face turns hot, insecurity threatening to overtake me as I think about how inexperienced I am.

“Look at me,” Zarreth demands, pulling his cock from his pants and stroking himself a few times. I’ve never seen a more mouth-watering sight. “Do you see how hard I am for you? Do you see how much I want you? Never doubt the effect you have on me.”

Standing, he steps out of his jeans and kneels by the bed. He pulls me down so my hips are on the edge, my legs resting over his shoulders. I prop myself up on my elbows so I can see him.

“Your pussy is mine. I love the way it smells. I love the way it looks. And I definitely love the way it tastes. Now, say it.”

I finally give in. “My pussy is yours.”

Zarreth grins, his eyes glimmering with amusement. Finally, I lay back, preparing to feel his tongue on my clit, when he pushes my knees into my armpits and places his tongue further back than expected. Oh no! I struggle, trying to pull away when I realize what he’s doing.

Zarreth holds me in place. “Do you need me to tie you up? I was going to save that for another time, but I would be more than happy to oblige.”

“No! Please,” I exclaim even though my inner vixen is screaming at me for denying her the experience.

“Then stay still,” he commands, holding me down. He licks me again, sliding his tongue all the way from my backside to my clit, making my entire body shiver. Pulling back the hood, he laps at the little nub with the flat part of his tongue, pleasure building until I’m ready to explode.

Yes! This is exactly what I need. “Oh my God. Please don’t stop,” I beg, my swollen

clit greedy for more attention.

Zarreth flicks his tongue, my body jerking with each pass. I press harder into his mouth, rubbing myself all over his face, soaking his chin.

Pushing two fingers inside me, he begins moving them in and out, making me moan as my back arches. He bites my clit, holding it between his teeth as I come, bucking my hips until the last wave of my orgasm subsides.

Zarreth looks at me, licking his fingers clean, giving me a wicked smile. “I will own every inch of you by the end of the night.”

Kneeling on the bed, he flips me over, so I’m on my knees and elbows. Plunging two fingers into me, he purrs, “Rub your clit for me, Melita .”

I rest my head on my forearm to support myself so I can rub my clit. I can’t believe how sensitive it is. I nearly come again after just a few strokes.

Spreading my wetness between my ass cheeks, he moves his finger over my hole. I jerk away when I realize what he’s doing.

Smack! My backside stings, the slap much harder than last time. He leans forward, whispering in my ear again, “Your body is mine. If you pull away from me again, I will spank you again. Do you understand?”

My body tenses. “I’m scared.”

Zarreth grabs my hips, pulling me back so my ass is completely exposed to him again. “I can’t promise to be gentle, but I will stop whenever you want. Now tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” I whisper.

“Mmm, that’s my girl,” he rumbles, sliding two fingers into me, curling them in a come-hither motion with the perfect amount of pressure. Moaning, I grind myself against his palm as heat gathers in my core.

“That’s good, baby. Just relax.” Using his other hand, he spreads the slickness between my legs to my rear entrance once more.

I close my eyes, taking a deep inhale. As I release my breath, he pushes a finger inside me. A cross between a moan and a scream escapes my lips. It fucking hurts, but instead of panicking, I force my muscles to loosen.

His finger moves in and out to the same pattern as the fingers rubbing my G-spot. I rock my hips as another orgasm builds inside me. Reaching between my slippery thighs, I begin rubbing my clit again.

“You’re so fucking sexy when you touch yourself.”

My breathing becomes erratic. My insides tighten around both of his fingers as he continues moving them, drawing a scream of pure ecstasy from my mouth. “Yes, yes!” I collapse on my stomach, my legs shaking as the effects of my orgasm linger.

“Holy shit,” I pant, rolling onto my back.

Zarreth chuckles as he climbs on top of me. “I’m glad you liked it because next time it will be my cock instead of my finger.”

I squeak, unable to tell if he’s joking. The scary thing is, I’m not sure if I want him to be.

He plants gentle kisses on my forehead, my eyelids, the sides of my mouth. The look in his eyes as they meet mine holds nothing but pure adoration. “I love you, Frankie. I knew you were mine the second I laid eyes on you.”

My heart swells as I savor this moment. I can’t believe he’s mine; this amazing man who feels like home. “I love you, too, Zarreth.”

I lose myself in the depth of his glowing eyes as he reaches down, positioning himself, pressing against my entrance. “Are you sure?”

I know he’s not asking for consent to enter me. This isn’t just about sex; it’s something much deeper, something that will connect us until our last breath. There is no use fighting what’s between us. I know in my heart we’re mates.

I grab the back of his neck, pulling him in as I crash my lips against his. “I have never been more sure of anything in my life.”

Zarreth holds both sides of my head, our eyes locking, as he pushes the tip inside me. “Oh God.”

A sharp sensation overwhelms me. I’m not a virgin, but holy shit! How is that just the tip? There’s no way he’ll fit inside me.

“Fuck! You’re so fucking tight. So fucking perfect.” Zarreth rests his forehead against mine.

The muscles on his back bulge as he wrestles for control, pushing deeper into me, making me cry out.

He pauses, letting my body adjust. “Breathe in, baby.”

When I do, he pushes himself the rest of the way in, my muscles instinctively tightening around him. I wince as every inch fills me, stretching me to my limits.

Zarreth sees my reaction. “Are you okay?”

I nod, urging him to keep going. His cock slowly moves in and out of me. I know he’s holding back so he doesn’t hurt me, but I need all of him.

“Please fuck me, Zarreth,” I whisper in his ear.

His face darkens. “I don’t want to hurt you, Melita .”

I grab a hold of his horns, whispering, “I want you to hurt me.”

A low growl leaves Zarreth’s throat. He pulls halfway out before slamming into me, my head just barely missing the headboard. I dig my nails into his back, holding on as he pounds into me, each thrust igniting a fire deep inside me.

Trailing my hands up his back, feeling his muscles ripple, my palms begin to tingle as a bright white light radiates from my palms to my fingertips. I swear our souls leave our bodies, combining into one as he continues to fuck me over and over, in and out. I arch my back, screaming Zarreth’s name as another orgasm crashes over me, leaving me breathless.

I open my eyes, startled when I see flames dancing in his. Veins bulge from his muscles, and for the first time, I see his fangs.

My heart beats heavily in my chest. “Zarreth?”

“I’m sorry,” he says through gritted teeth.

Oh no! My stomach drops.

We're not mates.

Why else would he be apologizing?

Of course we're not mates. Look at him. Why would a sexy six-hundred-year-old demon be mated to a twenty-two-year-old mousy human.

Just as my heart crumbles, he says, "I'm so sorry, Melita . I can't hold back any longer."

What did he say? He was holding back? I barely have time to register his words when he flips me over, grabbing my hips. Fucking me hard from behind, he pulls noises from my lips that don't even resemble something of this world.

I grab the headboard, holding on for dear life. The entire bed slides with each thrust until the bed frame breaks, the corner falling to the floor.

Zarreth tightens his grip, pulling my hips toward him, as he continues slamming into me, forcing my teeth to clench so they don't shatter.

A loud roar fills the room before Zarreth sinks his fangs into my neck. A sharp sting ignites my senses, creating a heady rush. My heart races as I wait for pain to come, but all I feel is intense pleasure coursing through my entire body as he claims what's his.

"Mine," he growls before biting into my flesh again, finding his release, as he holds himself inside me. His cum filling me completely while I tighten around him, drawing him deeper as we become one.

We collapse, an overwhelming sensation washing over us, leaving me breathless and trembling, as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest.

I am his and he is mine. We're mated. For the first time in my life, I feel truly wanted.

I don't know how much time passes before reality sets in. It takes me a minute to realize we're covered by a heavy blanket. Zarreth kisses me as he repeats one word: mine.

I turn to look at him and notice it's not a blanket keeping me warm. It's something else. Something I have never felt before. He moves to help me sit, and I discover what has enveloped us.

I sob loudly, taking in the beautiful male before me. His eyes are black. His muscles look larger, if that's even possible, and his horns are at what I assume is full length now. But what catches my attention the most are the beautiful black wings jutting out from Zarreth's back.

They drape behind him, deep ebony with threads of crimson weaving through like intricate veins. Reaching out tentatively, my fingers brush against the smooth leather-like texture.

I crawl onto his lap. "Zarreth." His name falls from my lips as I stare in awe. With his wings wrapped around us, enclosed in our private haven, I watch as a black mark materializes on Zarreth's chest. Intricate patterns weave together to form a symbol resembling tattered demon wings. Instinctively, I glance at my own chest as the matching symbol comes to life.

We sit in silence, entwined in each other's arms, souls linked in an unbreakable bond. Mated.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

In all of my 600 years, I have never felt so complete. A lump forms in my throat as I swallow a few times, trying to push it down. The words, I have none. My voice escapes me, leaving me shaken to the core. “Thank you,” I say, the only thing I manage to get out.

I know Frankie will be sore after the euphoria fades, so I run her a bath, adding a few drops of lavender oil, and heating it with my magic so the water stays warm longer. After turning off the faucet, I make my way to her room, my heart still racing as I reflect on what just happened. I pause in the doorway, drinking in the sight of her sprawled across the bed, her curls tousled around her head like a halo. I catch sight of her neck and grin. I marked her good.

She glances up at me and smiles, biting her lip as her cheeks turn pink. My cock stirs, but I ignore it as I scoop her up and carry her to the bath. She lets out a soft sigh, sinking into the warm water as I set her in the tub. Kneeling beside her, I wash her tenderly, letting the warmth soothe her muscles. How is it possible to love someone this much?

The next morning, I find myself staring out the kitchen window, waiting for coffee to brew so it’s ready for Frankie when she wakes. Watching two deer grazing in the back yard, I decide to update Ronin and see what intel he got from the other night.

I stretch my wings as the phone rings, relishing the familiar weight at my back, as my muscles contract. I’m whole again.

“Good morning,” I say when he picks up.

There’s a brief pause. “Zarreth?” he asks, confused. “Why the hell do you sound like that?”

“Like what?” I ask, a stupid fucking grin crossing my face.

“I don’t know, happy? Wait, did you get laid? I was right, wasn’t I—she’s your mate?”

I rub the mark over my chest, making sure it’s still there; that I didn’t dream it. “She is!” I want to fly around, screaming it from the sky for everyone to hear.

Ronin whoops. “Hell yeah! Congrats, brother. How’d she take the news about Nate?”

My smile falls. Fuck, I still need to come clean. I should’ve told her, but the moment she said she loved me, obsession consumed me with an insatiable need to make her mine. I’ll tell her the moment she wakes up.

“She still doesn’t know about Nate. I need to…”

“What about Nate?” I freeze at the sound of Frankie’s voice, disconnecting the phone. Shit!

Her eyes burn into the back of my head as I turn around to her glaring at me, arms crossed over her chest. “Melita, I meant to tell you before last night.”

“Tell me what? What do you know about my brother?” she demands.

I grab Frankie’s hand, pulling her to the couch. “Maybe you should sit down first.”
Damn it. I’m not ready for this.

She sits on the edge of the cushion, knee bobbing up and down, waiting for what I have to say. I squat in front of her, my wings brushing the floor as I take her hands in mine.

There's no easy way to say it, so I just say it. "He's in the Dark Realm."

I watch as my words sink in. I can almost feel the dread washing over her, panic flashing in her eyes. "What?"

"We were imprisoned together. Aradon has him."

Her eyebrows knit together in confusion. "That's impossible. You were here when Nate went missing."

I rub my thumb over her knuckles, knowing what I have to say next will break her. "Time works differently there. One day in the Human Realm is equal to one week in the Dark Realm."

Frankie pulls her hands away, her eyes pleading for my words to be a lie as she does the math. "No! Zarreth, no. Please tell me it's not true. That means Nate has been there for months."

"I'm so sorry, Melita, I never wanted you to find out like this," I say, knowing my words won't comfort her.

She releases a sorrowful wail, wrapping her arms around her waist before folding over her lap.

I sit next to her on the couch, pulling her into me, holding her as she cries. Her sobs slowly turn silent as she stands up, wiping her tears away before walking to a group of photos on the wall.

She points at a picture of Nate filleting a fish on the tailgate of a truck, while Frankie poses next to him making a peace sign with her fingers, sticking her tongue out.

She smiles sadly. “This is my favorite picture. It was taken two years ago when a group of us were camping in the mine pits not too far from here.” She turns to look at me. “That was the summer we moved into this house. It was the best time of my life. We were finally free to do whatever we wanted in a home where we felt safe.”

Her smile fades as determination washes over her face, her eyes glowing. “How soon can Ronin trace us there? How does that work, exactly?”

I look at her like she’s crazy. “You’re out of your mind if you think I’m letting you go to the Dark Realm.”

Frankie’s eyes widen in shock as she crosses her arms over her chest. If it were any other situation, I’d chuckle. Did she really think I’d let her go to the Dark Realm?

“Fuck you, Zarreth! Just because you’re my mate doesn’t mean I need to listen to you.”

My cock hardens at how tough she thinks she is, but I keep my expression neutral. I must be fucked up if seeing her mad turns me on.

“Nate knew what he was doing letting Aradon believe he was an only child. He knows you’re going through the change, so protecting you, he lied to Aradon. Don’t make his sacrifice be for nothing.”

She huffs. “You don’t get it, Zarreth. You have no idea what Nate and I have been through together. I owe him my life. I didn’t tell you what happened when Nate found me in the pantry that day. I almost died! I was starving and dehydrated. Nate nursed me back to health because my mom was gone, and the fuck head wouldn’t let

me go to the hospital. After that, Nate turned into a punching bag every night, trying to stop my stepdad from crawling in my bed. I will not abandon him.”

My blood boils with rage the moment the words spill from her lips, but I manage to tamp down my anger for Frankie’s sake. I make a silent vow to kill that bastard someday, making him regret the day he met Frankie Hart. “I know exactly how you feel about protecting a loved one. That’s why you’re not going to the Dark Realm.”

Frankie balls her fists in frustration, gritting her teeth. “You can’t stop me. I’ll just go to Dante for help. He seemed to like me.”

I stalk toward her, a deep rumble stirring in my throat. “Don’t underestimate me, little one. I will burn the fucking world down for you if that’s what it takes to keep you safe. If you think I’m bluffing, fucking try it. You don’t know how far I’ll go.”

Her nostrils flare in anger. She starts speaking, then stops, taking in a deep breath. “Get out,” she says through clenched teeth.

I chuckle. “Or what, you’ll call the cops like last time? Or maybe your big prison boyfriend will come save you.”

“Maybe he will,” she says with a mocking tone. “He might care enough about me to help get my brother back, especially if I return the favor.”

She shrieks when I grab her wrist, twisting it behind her back. My fingers wrap around her small throat. “Talk that way about another male, fake or not, and see what happens. The spankings the other day were for pleasure. Imagine how it would feel as punishment.”

The scent of warm honey fills the air as I tighten my fingers, letting me know how aroused she is. “And I won’t let you come next time.”

She moans, but quickly schools her features when I release her, blinking away her desire, leaving anger in its place. Her expression hardens as the air shifts, making it clear I'm not forgiven. She opens her mouth to speak but quickly changes her mind.

"Get the fuck out," she finally says, walking to the door and pulling it open. Biting her lip, she tries holding back her emotions, her eyes glisten with moisture as she wipes away the single tear rolling down her cheek.

Fuck, I hate seeing her cry, but if that's what it takes to keep her safe, so be it. "Frankie..."

She stares straight ahead, avoiding eye contact. "Just go."

I grab her wrist, bringing her close. She only fights me for a moment as I bring my lips to her forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow." Then I turn and walk out the door.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

“A aah!” I scream, pulling at my hair. God, he pisses me off. Thinks he can tell me what to do. I’ll find a way to get my brother back whether he helps me or not. The tears I’ve been holding back finally break free.

Frustrated, I walk to my room and see the broken bed. I rub my mating mark, remembering last night. Remembering the way my soul called to Zarreth when we mated. The way it still calls to him.

I pile books under my bedframe, leveling it the best I can. I’ll never see my brother again. The heaviness in my heart becomes too much to bear as I sink onto my bed, laying my head on my pillow. I curl onto my side and let it all out, crying until no tears are left.

My door opens as Jess walks into my room. “Zarreth called me. He didn’t tell me what happened, just that you needed...” She stops talking when she sees the bed. “This doesn’t look safe,” she mumbles to herself, cautiously sitting on the edge before rubbing my back. “What happened?”

It hurts to say it out loud, but I somehow manage to push past the tightness in my throat and say it, anyway. “Aradon has Nate, and I made Zarreth leave because he won’t help me save him.” The tears I thought had dried up come rushing back, as if summoned by the weight of my words.

Jess’ jaw drops in shock. “What? Nate’s in the Dark Realm?”

I watch her reaction change from confusion to sympathy as I nod my head. She pulls me close, not saying anything, knowing I don't like talking about emotions.

I cling to her for what feels like an eternity before letting go, eyes burning and puffy from crying so much tonight.

Jess wipes the tears from her eyes, her brows knitting together with concern as she sees my chest. "Oh, honey, you mated."

"Yeah, what a day. Find my mate and lose my brother at the same time. But fuck Zarreth, right? If he doesn't want to help me, I'll find another way."

Jess raises her eyebrows. "Frankie, you know you can't go after Nate. I'm sorry, but I'm with Zarreth on this one."

I scoff, pulling farther away from her. What is she talking about? She, out of everyone, should understand why I need to do this. She knows how much Nate and I have been through. "What do you mean you're on Zarreth's side? I can't just leave Nate there. He would come for me in a heartbeat, and I'll do the same for him."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but going after Nate would be a suicide mission. Isn't Aradon the same demon who tortured Zarreth and Ronin for the past twenty years? You're crazy if you think you can save your brother from a monster like him."

Deep down inside, buried beneath my grief, I know she's right. But I will die trying to save my brother. "If you think I would put my life over my brother's, then you don't know me as well as you should."

Her lips purse into a tight line as she processes what I said. Hurt flashes in her eyes, followed by anger. "If you think I'll just sit back and let you do this, then you don't know me as well as you should."

Damnit why doesn't anyone understand why I need to do this? Of course I know it's dangerous, but they can't just expect me to sit here, doing nothing. I rub my temples. "I can't do this right now. I'm going to bed." It's still early, but I can't handle the heartbreak, and I'm sick of arguing with everyone. Maybe sleep will offer me a temporary escape from it all.

"Fine," Jess throws her hands in the air. "But you can't just push people out of your life because you're hurt. You have people who care about you, Frankie, you're just too stubborn to see it."

I pull the covers over my head, ignoring her. I know I'm acting childish, but I hurt so much. I just need to be alone.

I hear Jess huff in frustration, her footsteps retreating. "I'll let you hide for one day, but after that you need to take your grief and channel it into your training if you have any hope of possibly saving Nate."

Not long after I hear the front door slam, Ms. Kitty comes into my room and hops on my bed. "At least you're on my side," I say, scratching her behind the ear.

I hear commotion coming from outside. "Is that all you got, pussy?" You've got to be kidding me. No one ever listens to me!

I look out the window and see Zarreth and Ronin sparring in my back yard. Ugh! I told him to leave, not prance around flexing his stupid muscles, sweat tracing a path down his chiseled abs. His wings catch the air with a graceful fluidity as he maneuvers around Ronin. I return my gaze to his face, our eyes locking as he smirks. I flip him off, making his smile widen further.

Asshole! I quickly pull down the shade before crawling back into bed. I should stomp outside and punch Zarreth in his infuriatingly hot face. Why does he have to be so

attractive? It would feel so good to be in his arms right now...if he wasn't such a dick. Instead, I grab Ms. Kitty and cuddle her until I fall asleep.

"Get the fuck up. I called Ronin." I hear the shade being raised as sunlight spills into the room. My head is pounding from all the crying I did last night. What the hell?

I sit up, flipping the blankets down. "What? Why? You know I want nothing to do with Zarreth."

Jess digs through my dresser and throws clothes at me. "Ronin promised not to bring Zarreth or even mention his name, but you need to start training. Ronin said he would help you."

"Fine! When do we start?" I ask.

"In about thirty minutes," she says, an innocent look on her face.

I grimace. "Sometimes I want to throat-punch you."

She bats her eyelashes at me. "I love you too!"

Two hours later, I'm running past Ronin, dripping sweat. "Keep going Frances!" he yells. "You're almost done." He's leaning one hip against my car, typing on his phone.

I add him to my list of future throat-punch victims as a sharp pain stabs me in my side. My lungs burn, making breathing a struggle. I'm so out of shape, but at least my heart is pounding in my chest for a reason other than anxiety. Fuck everyone, especially Zarreth for adding to this.

Ronin makes me sprint up and down the old dirt road connected to my driveway. I

stop every two minutes to do push-ups, crunches, and squats. Jess started running with me, but now she's sitting cross-legged on the trunk of my car, eating a scone.

My muscles ache with exhaustion. I don't see how running and doing sit-ups will help me control my nonexistent powers. I wonder if Ronin is secretly trying to punish me on Zarreth's behalf.

I finish the workout, catching Jess and Ronin talking about me as I make my way over to them.

"I bet she only lasts two days," Ronin says.

"Ha, you don't know how stubborn Frankie can be. I bet she makes it a week before she gives in," Jess says.

"What the hell? Are you two seriously betting on me?" I ask, twisting the top off my water bottle. Cool liquid soothes my parched throat as I take a drink before collapsing on the grass next to my car. I remove my sweaty shoes and run my hot feet over the cool grass.

A cloud of smoke emerges, warmth enveloping me in a soft embrace before he appears. My nerves immediately calm in his presence. Have I always felt this way around him, or is it because we mated?

"I bet she takes me back by the end of the day," Zarreth says, flaring his wings wide, showing off an impressive span.

I quickly look away, hiding my attraction to him. Why does he have to be so hot? "What the hell? You guys said he wasn't going to be here!" Fucking assholes. I'm so tired of everyone lying to me.

Jess gives me a guilty smile. “As your best friend, it’s my obligation to step in when you’re being a dumbass. I’m simply invoking that right. I’m not letting your stubborn ass get you killed. A crazy demon is after you, so you need all the help you can get. Suck it up. You don’t have to talk to him, you don’t even have to be nice to him, but you need to stop this.”

I exhale sharply. I know she’s right. I don’t have to like Zarreth, but it would be dumb to turn away his help. “You’re right...”

Jess gasps dramatically, holding her chest. “Do my ears deceive me?” she mocks. “Is Frankie Hart finally coming around?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sorry for being so irrational, and I really do appreciate you guys helping me.”

Zarreth takes a step towards me with a sweet smile on his face. I look at him like he’s crazy. “Don’t get any ideas. We may be mated, but it doesn’t mean I have to like you right now. I’m still pissed you won’t take me to the Dark Realm.”

His smile turns into a cocky smirk. “That’s okay, you’re sexy when you’re pissed.”

I shake my head. It’s just my luck being mated to someone so irritating.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

A bead of sweat rolls down Frankie's neck, into her cleavage. She looks exhausted, even though I watched her sleep through the night. "Don't try to flirt with me, Zarreth. I know I look like shit with these dark circles under my bloodshot eyes," she barks.

I move closer, my shadow blocking the sun as I loom over her. "You could never look like shit. I'd still ravage you, just saying."

She scoffs as she sits in a butterfly position, stretching her inner thighs. "We just finished training, so you can leave."

Ha! She thinks that was training? I can't wait to see how feisty she gets once she realizes we haven't even started training.

Ronin starts laughing. "Um, Frankie, what you did was called a workout. You know, to get you in shape. We haven't started actual training yet."

I hold back a smile when Frankie's eyes get big. "What!?" Laying back, she groans, draping her arm over her forehead. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Nope, quite the opposite, actually," I remind her, offering my hand to help pull her up.

She scowls at my hand like it's a used tissue before standing on her own. "Alright, let's get this over with so I don't have to look at you anymore."

I remove my shirt and begin stretching. My back aches. It's going to take a lot for me to regain my strength so I can fly. Even though I have my wings again, I haven't used those muscles in twenty years.

Frankie's gaze roams over my body, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip as I spread my wings, enjoying her eyes on me. She notices me staring at her and quickly furrows her brow, masking her reaction. She still wants me.

Eager to get started so I have an excuse to touch her, I say, "We'll start with some basic self-defense skills because falling to the ground when someone has a hold of you didn't work too well last time." I think back to when she fell in the woods, her towel unwrapping, her naked body exposed to me for the first time. I should have known then and there she was mine.

Confused, Jess looks at Ronin. "Do I even want to know?"

"Trust me, you don't," he replies.

Frankie glares at me and crosses her arms. "You're such an asshole. I won't stand a chance against anyone as big as you, anyway."

That's what a lot of people think, but it's not true. Frankie could hold her own one day with enough training. "You'd be surprised, skill and speed trumps size every time if you know what you're doing."

"That's right," Ronin says, signaling Jess to hop off the car. "Come on, Jess. It wouldn't hurt for you to learn this too."

"Okay, but let's go over here so I'm not distracted," Jess says, winking in my direction as she pulls Ronin away, giving us some privacy.

I look over at Frankie, who is putting her shoes back on, and smile. “You know, I’m really starting to like her.”

“Of course you are, my traitorous best friend is on your side in all of this,” she says as she stands directly in front of me, getting into the position I showed her when we practiced throwing a punch.

An invisible string pulls me closer to her. “Let’s start by showing you how to break a grip.” Demonstrating the technique, I grab her wrist. “You want to twist and pull away like this.” She watches me intently as I guide her through the movements. “You got it?”

“Yeah, it’s not rocket science,” she bites with a smirk on her face.

I grin. “There’s my Melita .” I grip her wrist with more strength this time.

She grits her teeth with determination. “I’m NOT your Melita ,” she says, twisting and pulling away just like I showed her. She gives me a cocky look, turning me on.

“Hell yeah, Frankie! That was good.” Pride lights up her face. Damn she’s beautiful.

We practice wrist control until she feels confident with it. We’ve gone through a few different techniques, and I know she’s tired, but I want to teach her a triangle choke. Every female should know how to do this. It’s the perfect choke to use on someone who is larger than you because you can use your leg strength, and it’s a position you might already be in if someone’s trying to take advantage of you.

“I want to show you one more thing for now, and then we can be done for the day,” I say.

Frankie’s face falls slightly at the mention of being done, but she quickly recovers it

thinking I didn't see. A glimmer of hope stirs inside of me, knowing she's enjoying this more than she lets on.

She claps her hands together. "Okay, let's do it."

I quickly grab her by the waist, positioning her so she's laying on her back, my wings fanning out slightly as I settle between her legs. "Woah, buddy! This is not what I had in mind," she says trying to wiggle away, even though I can smell her desire.

Grabbing her by the thighs, I pull her back toward me. "Get your mind out of the gutter. I'm simply showing you a jujitsu technique," I tease.

She fights back a smile. "Yeah, okay. Show me how it's done then."

I lock eyes with her, giving her a cocky smile, as I show her how to drag my arm across her body while wrapping her right leg around my neck. My face now between her legs, I instantly feel myself getting hard. "While keeping your right leg around my neck, place the back of your left knee over your right ankle. You want to make a triangle shape with your legs," I explain, feeling the heat radiate from her body. "That's perfect, now squeeze, locking in the choke."

Her legs tighten around my neck, pulling my face closer to her sweet spot. "Control is key," I murmur, not sure if I am talking to her or myself at this point. "Don't let me get away."

She thrusts her hips up, squeezing her legs tighter. I can't help myself as I grab the outside of her thighs, pulling her closer so there's no space between us, telling myself it's for the sake of the choke.

A small moan, mixed with a whimper escapes her lips. I know she's thinking the same thoughts I am as she runs her hands through the back of my hair, remembering

what it's like to have me between her thighs.

A low growl rumbles from my throat. "Honey," I whisper, pressing my nose between her thighs. She smells so fucking good. She moans again. "I told you you'd be mine by the end of the day."

"Damn it, Zarreth," Frankie complains, pushing me away as she unhooks her legs and sits up. "That's not fair. You had me in a precarious situation. You knew what you were doing."

I feign innocence. "I was simply showing you some defense techniques."

"Whatever, we're done here." Frankie stands, brushing herself off as I pull my wings tight against me, falling back onto the ground. I knew better than to say that, but I love getting her riled up.

Jess and Ronin are done training as well, so Frankie walks over to them as I stay laying on the grass, looking up at the sky. Well, that didn't go as planned.

"I'm ready to go," Frankie yells over to Jess before slamming the car door. Jess waves to us before hopping in the car and driving away.

Ronin walks over to me and kicks my boot. "She'll come around," he reassures me.

I don't say anything. Instead, I close my eyes, squeezing the bridge of my nose with my fingers. Damn it, I need her. My chest is hollow, she took my heart when she left, and it fucking hurts.

I finally sit up, looking at Ronin. "Ready to get the shit kicked out of you? I need to spar."

Before I finish my sentence, Ronin is already cracking his neck. “Let’s fucking go, brother.”

That night, I sneak into Frankie’s room once she’s fast asleep, just like I do every other night. I plan to just sit in the corner, watching her breathe like I’ve done so many times before, but she starts thrashing around, her breaths becoming shallow and erratic. With a painful expression on her face, her soft whimpers turn into screams. “Nate! I’m coming, Nate.”

Guilt washes over me. It’s obvious Frankie needs her brother. I will never let her risk her life for his, but I will gladly risk mine for her if that’s what it takes to make her happy. In that moment, my decision to go to the Dark Realm and save Nate is cemented. I will bring her brother back.

This may be the last time I see her. I go to her, comforting her even though I know it will piss her off. I need to feel her skin against mine, to breathe in her addictive scent.

Peeling off my shirt, I slip under the covers, knowing she will murder me if I strip completely naked. My heart races at the familiar pull toward her. Drawing her close to me, she immediately stops trembling, sighing softly as her screaming stops.

I know my touch brings her relief, even if it’s only temporary. Bringing heat to my hands, I run them over her back and rub the base of her neck. She exhales, tension leaving her body. Small whimpers leave her lips as I trail my hands over her hips and thighs, soothing her with my touch.

She instinctively turns toward me, running her hand down my back until it reaches my ass, where it rests. She snuggles in closer, her lips making contact with my chest. She’s gonna be so pissed when she wakes up, but I don’t leave. I need her one last time.

I feel Frankie's body stiffen when she realizes she's not alone. I hold my breath, waiting for her to freak out. "Zarreth," she mumbles. Her eyes open, gazing up at me with conflict in them. She's still angry, but there is an undeniable craving there too.

"Melita ," I whisper in her ear before brushing my lips against it, drawing a moan from her.

"Don't," she warns, slightly pushing me away, but I hear her breath hitch as her body responds to mine. Her hands begin gliding over my biceps. "Please, Zarreth, I..." She doesn't complete her sentence.

"What is it, Melita ? Tell me what you need." I hear the desperation in my voice, as I grab her chin and tilt it up, her eyes meeting mine.

She starts and then stops, a single tear running down her cheek. "I don't know what I need. I'm so mad at you, but..."

Hope sparks within me. "Baby, you can still hate me in the morning but let me do this for you." Let me do this for me, one last time.

She bites her lip, her resolve faltering as yearning seeps in. I know she needs this, but she's too stubborn to let herself feel it. "All I need is a nod, don't overthink it."

She closes her eyes before giving me one quick nod. That's all I need. I lose myself in her, letting the world fade into nothingness. I savor every part of her as I take her in, committing every curve, every freckle, every detail to memory.

Time stands still as we lose ourselves in one another, every touch strengthening our bond. She's my anchor, my light in the darkness. I will save her brother, and I will make it back to her.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

“S o, you want a traveler’s mark,” Dante states without me saying anything. I know he can see the future, but it’s still unsettling knowing he can use his abilities on you without you even knowing.

I stand before him in the same building Frankie and I stood not too long ago. Only this time, we’re in an office instead of a ballroom with demons fucking on the couch and succubi swinging from the drapes. “That’s why I’m here.”

Dante’s perched on a couch in the corner of his office. He uncrosses his legs, leaning forward as he drums his fingers together. “Nice wings!” He attempts to deter me. When I don’t respond, he says, “I told you she was your mate. Look at you, sacrificing your newfound freedom for a human. In-laws are such a drag.”

I ignore his remark, standing in front of him with my arms crossed over my chest. “What do you want in return? I know how rare it is to receive one.”

Only a handful of demons have the ability to bestow a traveler’s mark on another. It drains a lot of power, so usually they’re only reserved for spies or in exchange for something valuable.

Dante leans back, recrossing his legs, and waiving his hand in the air. “Oh Zarreth, you have nothing I want. However, if you do manage to somehow destroy Aradon, it’ll be worth it for me.”

I didn’t expect this to go so easily. Am I ready to leave Frankie behind? I know she’ll

be safe with Ronin, but still. “How do I know you won’t go after Frankie while I’m gone?”

“I guess you’ll have to trust me. If it makes you feel any better, your mate is of no use to me. I have no plans to take over the Human Realm like Aradon does. I just want him gone so I can continue living as I have, in peace, in the realm that has become my home. And you, my friend, are the key to that. You and this.” He pulls a little white container from his pocket and tosses it to me.

“What’s this?” I open it to find a thin yellow, dissolvable strip inside.

Dante locks his eyes on mine, his theatrical demeanor giving way to a more serious tone. “This is the key to saving the future. It’s called K4. Don’t lose this. It will come in handy when you least expect it.” He stands, walking over to his desk, keeping his back to me.

So, Jess’ little boyfriend was right about the K4. But how the hell will this save the future? “You expect me to take this, not knowing what it does?”

He turns, facing me. “It will give you the strength of ten demons, unleashing speed beyond anything you’ve ever witnessed. It is the key to stopping Aradon.”

Definitely too good to be true. “So why don’t you take it?”

With knitted brows, his eyes bore into mine. “I like you, Zarreth, so heed my warning. Use this as your last resort. Once you take it, you will lose all reasoning. There is only a fifty percent chance you will survive, and an even smaller chance you will regain your sanity.”

I know damn well I won’t touch the K4, but I put it in my pocket anyway.

“Is this where the hell-humans came from?” It’s the only explanation that makes any sense. I know it can’t be that easy to make those abominations. There has to be more to it.

His face brightens, a menacing smirk pulling at the corners of his lips. “Hell-humans? I like that term.” He giggles. “I admit, I got a little careless with my experiments, letting a few get away. I guess I should thank you and Ronin for taking care of those minor inconveniences for me.”

After all his years, he’s finally lost his mind. “Aren’t you worried about the Elders?” If they find out he’s experimenting on humans, there will be hell to pay. They’ll come for us all, even Frankie.

Dante’s nostrils flare, jaw tightening. “The Elders are too concerned with themselves to focus on us. Besides, a great war is on the horizon. Greater than any of us have ever borne witness to. While the Elders sit twiddling their thumbs with their heads up their asses, I will be busy creating armies of hell-humans to protect the Human Realm.”

My jaw drops. After discovering Frankie, I knew the prophecy could be true, but hearing Dante talk about the looming war blows my mind. It’s happening. It’s really fucking happening. The realms as we know them might actually be destroyed.

Okay, I can’t focus on that right now. I need to save Nate, so I change the subject back to Aradon. “What makes you so sure I’ll be the one to defeat Aradon?”

He shrugs his shoulders dramatically. “Oh, I’m not sure. The future is very blurry where that is concerned. More than likely, you won’t make it back alive, but either way you need to go. The future depends on it.”

I scoff. He has no idea the lengths I will go for my mate. I’ll save Nate, and I’ll kill

Aradon in the process. Squaring my shoulders, I hold out my arm. “Let’s do this then.”

With a cat-like grin slowly forming, he reaches for me, wrapping his long, cold fingers around my forearm. The chill beneath his hands transforms into a burning heat as he begins chanting, searing my skin, filling the air with the smell of charred flesh. Gritting my teeth, I endure the pain until it finally fades as if it were never there.

Dante releases my arm, stepping back. I look down expecting to find red, blistered skin. Instead, a dragon with five heads, representing each of the realms, covers my forearm.

He nods to my new mark. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I don’t care what it looks like, as long as it works.

With a sigh, Dante says, “Oh, Zarreth. I look forward to seeing you upon your return.” Grabbing his cane, he adds. “ If you return. I do hope so. I could use someone like you as an ally.”

Dante disappears, leaving me in a cloud of smoke as I pull out my phone. I shoot a text to Ronin, the only demon I trust to keep Frankie safe while I’m gone.

Watch over her.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

It's only been a few days since Zarreth snuck into my room, but I miss him. Where is he? I know I've been a bitch, but I didn't expect him to give up on us so easily. I should have listened to Jess when she told me to be nicer to him.

Thankfully, Ronin and Jess have been keeping me busy. Every day we come to the same spot and train. We've been working on sword fighting, throwing knives, hand to hand combat, and controlling my magic. Zarreth would be proud of me. I'm actually picking up on everything quickly, well aside from my magic.

So far, It's as consistent as a broken compass. I'm more successful at making plants wilt instead of grow, just like my relationship. That may be a testament to my mental health, being my powers are based on emotion.

Nights are the worst, almost unbearable. That's when my mind wanders thinking about everything Nate is going through, wondering where Zarreth is. My chest throbs. There goes my mating mark, aching again. Zarreth said mates could die from a broken heart, but that's only if the other mate dies. I know he's alive, so why does it feel like I'm dying?

"Focus, Frankie," Ronin says for the fourth time.

"I am! The stupid flower won't grow," I growl.

"You need to control your emotions. Think of something that makes you happy."

I glare at him, stomping on the flower. “There, that makes me happy.” I give him a smart-ass look, satisfaction setting in now that I don’t have to look at the fucking thing any longer.

Huffing, he closes his eyes, his jaw flexing. “I get you’re not in a good place right now, but you need to stop acting like a fucking child and take this seriously.”

Woah, Ronin is usually so patient with me. “What the hell, Ronin?”

He walks over to the bag of weapons, running his hands through his hair. “I’m done for the night, Frankie. I have a lot on my mind, and I don’t feel like babysitting tonight.” He swings the bag over his shoulder and traces away.

Shocked, I look at Jess. “What the hell was that? I know I was acting childish, but I’ve been trying so hard these past few days.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t know. I mean, you haven’t been yourself lately, but I don’t think it’s you. Something’s really bothering him.”

What if it’s Zarreth? What if something happened to him? “Ronin would tell me if something was up with Zarreth, right?”

Jess rubs my shoulder. “Yeah, I’m sure he would. He’s probably just pissy because he hasn’t gotten laid in a while.”

I rub the back of my neck. My muscles have been so tense lately, between stress and working out. “Pizza at my house?” I ask as we walk toward my car.

“Hell yeah!” she responds.

Back at the house, we scarf down a taco pizza. If my appetite keeps up like this,

maybe I should consider adding protein and veggies to my diet.

Ms. Kitty is roaming around the house meowing. She's been doing that ever since Zarreth left. I side-eye my traitorous cat. "We're mad at him, remember?" Why isn't anyone on my side about this? Nate would be.

I get it, though. I miss him too.

"I got you something." Jess reaches into her purse, pulling out a black bag that says Fun Factory on it. "I figured you could use a little pick-me-up."

I open the bag to find a pink box with the words 'Fulfill your biggest sized fantasies with this 11" whopper. The bestselling dong just got even bigger.'

I giggle at the ridiculously enormous dildo. "Is this for real? I don't need this right now."

"Sure you do, poor B.O.B.'s not going to cut it anymore now that you've had some demon dick."

Sex is the last thing on my mind. However, it might come in handy if my powers don't come. "If nothing else, I can whack Aradon on the head with it when he comes for me."

"Stop talking like that. You got this, Frankie. Ronin's on our side, and Zarreth won't let anything happen to you."

I huff. "If Zarreth cares as much as everyone thinks he does, then where the hell is he?"

Rolling her eyes, she scoffs. "You literally told him to leave. If you want him back,

maybe you should consider being nicer to him.”

I finally get the monster dildo out of its packaging and bonk Jess on the shoulder with it. “Maybe I would if I knew where the hell he is.”

A smile slowly stretches across Jess’ face. “I fucking knew it! I knew you would come around. Ronin owes me five bucks.”

As if we summoned him, Ronin walks in with his duffle bag over his shoulder and sees the dildo. “Oh man, you guys started the party without me.”

Jess chuckles. “That’s for Frankie, get your own dildo.”

He eyeballs the pink piece of silicone, raising one eyebrow. “Not bad,” he says, throwing down his duffle bag, this one not full of weapons.

“What’s the bag for?” I ask.

“I’m moving in,” he says. “I know you don’t want to hear his name, but I promised a certain someone I would look after his mate, and it’s a lot easier to do it from here.”

A small amount of tension melts away. I feel safer having Ronin in the house. “You can have Nate’s room.”

His eyes widen. “No arguing? I had an entire speech prepared.”

I roll my eyes as he heads toward Nate’s room. Jess hops up and catches him before he makes it down the hall. Holding out her hand she says, “She caved. You owe me five bucks. She lasted longer than you thought she would.”

“What?! I didn’t cave.” Even though I do miss him. “I just said I wish I knew where

he was so I could be nicer to him.”

Jess scoffs. “Same thing.” She turns toward Ronin, holding out her hand again. “Now pay up.”

Ronin reaches in his pocket, pulling out a crumpled five-dollar bill, he places it in Jess’ open palm as he looks at me. “About time—I can’t believe you held out this long. The females in the Dark Realm throw themselves at Zarreth’s feet.”

I snarl, a pang of jealousy running through me. “Those whores.” But I can’t blame them. Zarreth is irresistible, and he treats me better than I deserve.

Ronin chuckles as Jess walks over to me, throwing her arm around my shoulder. “I have to go, but let’s do a sleepover this weekend. We can show Ronin what it’s like to have fun for a change.”

“You’re NOT painting my nails,” Ronin says, making his way down the hall.

“Oh, I have something special planned for you,” Jess yells at his back.

Ronin grins over his shoulder. “I can’t wait,” he says before disappearing into Nate’s room.

Jess leaves and I take a shower. When I exit the bathroom, I find Ronin looking at photos of Nate on the wall.

“Did you know I met your brother?” Ronin asks, walking to the fridge, grabbing two beers.

He hands one to me as I hop on the kitchen counter. “I wondered if you met him. Obviously Zarreth has.”

Ronin settles himself on a bar stool before taking a swig of his beer. He sighs heavily before speaking. “Aradon forced me to work for him. I’m one of the few demons who have a traveler’s mark, so he allowed me more freedom than most. Part of my duties were to check on the captives held in the dungeon. Every night I would tend to Zarreth’s wounds. He had it worse than other prisoners. Aradon loved giving him special attention.

“One day I went to check on him, but he wasn’t there. Aradon probably had him delivered to his private chambers. Instead, I saw your brother. I could tell he wasn’t fully human because of his scent, but he had no powers. I wasn’t sure why he was being held captive. Then I remembered Aradon talking about a secret weapon and the prophecy about a powerful half-breed who would alter the realms forever.”

He glances over at me. “Do you want to hear this? I know Zarreth likes to treat you like a fucking snowflake, but you need to know.”

Finally, someone willing to tell me everything. “Yes. I want to hear it all.”

He nods. “Zarreth and your brother became close in the weeks they were imprisoned together. One time when I was patching Zarreth up, Nate told us he had a sister whose eyes would glow when she was upset. That’s when we knew Aradon had the wrong sibling.”

I continue listening in silence. I can’t believe Nate never said anything about my eyes glowing. How much did he know?

“We knew you couldn’t fall into the wrong hands, so we decided now was the time to finally escape.”

“And you guys just left him there?” Tears burn the back of my eyes. I’m so fucking sick of crying. It’s time to pull up my big girl pants. I am NOT a delicate snowflake.

“We didn’t have a choice. We needed Nate to stay behind so Aradon didn’t suspect anything while we searched for you,” Ronin explains.

“So, my brother was still alive when you saw him last?” I’m afraid to hear the answer, but I need to know.

“Yes, Frankie. He was still alive. Aradon won’t kill him until he discovers Nate has no powers, which could take months still.” Or until he finds out about me, but that part was left unsaid.

“Why did you and Zarreth wait so long to escape?” It sounded so easy when they talked about it.

He leans back, glancing away, as he rubs the back of his neck. “Zarreth is too loyal to our horde. As long as Aradon had us, he promised to leave the Recreants alone.” Ronin brings his eyes to mine before he continues. “You can’t imagine what Aradon did to keep us in line.”

Stealing my spine, I prepare myself to ask a question I don’t want to know the answer to. “Is that how Zarreth lost his wings? You said Aradon loved paying him special attention.”

Ronin studies me for a minute, like he’s debating if he should tell me. “You might not want to hear this, Frankie,” he warns.

“I know, but I need to.”

With a sharp exhale, he continues. “In the Dark Realm, there are two poles standing fifteen feet above ground. Every month, Aradon would nail Zarreth’s wings to the poles, letting him hang until his body weight gradually ripped them away. Demons from all around would gather, throwing rocks at him for days to prove their

allegiance to Aradon. Eventually Zarreth would fall to the ground, laying there covered in blood, limp and lifeless, until Aradon sent his servants to retrieve him. For twenty years, the cycle would repeat every time Zarreth's wings grew back."

A wave of horror washes over me as his words sink in, leaving me paralyzed. My mate! How did he endure that type of torture for twenty years?

I dart to the bathroom, my stomach churning. Ronin follows me and holds my hair back while I empty the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

"I'm so sorry," he says. "I never should've told you."

My throat burns as I push through the nausea and sit back on my heels. Without realizing it, I place my palm over my mating mark as I often do when I think of Zarreth. I need him.

With tears in my eyes, I wipe my mouth and look at him. "I can't believe I pushed him away." Standing on wobbly legs, I hurry from the bathroom to find my phone. "I need to call him."

I'm so fucking mad at myself. I was so focused on my own grief that I didn't stop to think about everything Zarreth went through. I may not have known the extent of his torture, but I knew it was bad. I was so selfish. I frantically search the kitchen until I spot my phone on top of the microwave.

Ronin grabs me, making me face him. "Frankie, you can't do that."

I rip my arm from his grasp, grabbing my phone. "He's my mate, Ronin. I know he'll forgive me, even if he's angry with me."

"There's nothing to forgive. Zarreth isn't mad at you; he's fucking obsessed with

you.” His eyes hold nothing but the truth but doubt still lingers in my chest.

“If he’s so obsessed with me, then why did he ditch me after one fight?” I know I told him to leave me alone, but I didn’t think he’d listen. He told me nothing could come between mates, but then he just disappeared.

Ronin sighs. “Do you honestly believe Zarreth is capable of leaving you? He suffered decades of torture to protect his people. What makes you think he would give up on his mate so easily?”

He’s right. I need to find him. Grabbing my keys, I hurry toward the front door. “Where is he?”

Ronin stands in front of it, blocking me from leaving. “Frankie, you can’t go to him.” I shove him, meeting more resistance than expected.

I look up at him, gritting my teeth in determination. “Get the hell out of my way, Ronin.”

“He’s not here, Frankie,” he states, getting in my face.

“What do you mean he’s not here? What aren’t you telling me?” I’m sick of people treating me like a child. Like I can’t handle the fucking truth.

His eyes soften as he looks at me. “He’s not in the Human Realm. He went to save your brother.”

I stumble back, the weight of his words crushing me as they sink in. “No!” I scream. “No, no, no, please tell me it’s not true.” The only way to save my brother is to go to the Dark Realm and kill Aradon, the one responsible for Zarreth’s torture.

I can't let him do that. I won't just sit here, helpless, while both my mate and my brother sacrifice themselves for me. I won't lose them both.

Tears spill down my cheeks, but this time, they're not tears of sorrow. Rage builds inside me like a volcano about to erupt, heat building within as my powers spark to life.

Ronin must see the determination in my eyes because he blocks the door again. The rational part of my brain knows it's not his fault, but I'm afraid of what will happen if he doesn't move out of my way.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Way," I breathe out, trying to calm my rage as my palms burn with dark magic.

"It's okay, Frankie." He takes a tentative step forward, approaching me cautiously like I'll erupt at any moment. "Take a breath. Try to calm down." He brings his hands up, as if to soothe me.

"Calm down?" I squawk. "My mate is in the Dark Realm where he was tortured for two decades, and you expect me to calm down?" Fury bubbles beneath the surface of my skin. FUCK HIM.

"Poor choice of words, I admit." His eyes go wide as I feel my gaze sharpen. The slight pressure behind my eyes lets me know they're glowing. "But you need to control your emotions, Frankie."

I struggle to keep my magic in check. "Bring me to him," I demand, taking a step closer to him.

"You know I won't do that. You're my friend, but Zarreth is like a brother, and I would never betray him. I promised to look after his mate, and I meant it."

I lunge at him. Screaming, I pound my fists into his chest. I can't stop thinking about everything Zarreth has gone through. Everything my brother is probably going through. And it's all my fault. They're both sacrificing their lives to save me.

Red blurs my vision, my hands burning as if they're on fire. Pressing them against Ronin's chest, I release an ear-piercing roar. When I look up, I see blood dripping from his eyes, ears, and nose. He's begging me to stop, but I can't.

"Frankie, please," he slurs before going limp, collapsing to the ground.

I rummage through his pockets until I find his phone. If Ronin won't take me to Zarreth, maybe Dante will. Finding his number, I press the call button. I will go to the Dark Realm one way or another.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

“Welcome, welcome.” Dante stands in front of the same building we were at the first time I met him. He’s wearing a black, baggy tunic, similar to the one he wore last time I saw him. His long white hair is pulled back into a low ponytail. His eyes are so black you can’t see his pupils. I swear they were gray before. “I’m thrilled you called,” he says, clasping his hands together, wearing that knowing smirk.

My knees shake as I get closer to him. “Th-thank you for seeing me.” I stutter over my words as I try to remember my manners. Don’t lose your nerve, Frankie, you got this.

“I always have time for you, child.” He reaches his hand out to me. “Let’s go somewhere a little more private.”

That’s weird. We seem to be the only ones here. I take his hand before I think better of it. I’m shocked at how cold they are compared to Zarreth’s. I guess I assumed all demons were warm to the touch.

A tingling sensation, similar to the one I get in my hands when I use my magic, courses through my entire body. Dizziness washes over me as I collapse. When I come too, Dante is holding me in his arms.

We’re no longer standing outside but instead are in a room I’ve never been in before. He sets me down, but my equilibrium is still off so I nearly fall over again. He offers me his arm to keep me steady.

“Don’t tell me Zarreth has never traced with you before? Oh Frankie, you are really missing out.”

I regain my balance before letting go of his arm. “Where are we?”

The room is small and quaint. Paintings of daisies hang on the cream-colored walls. He leads me to a sitting area where dainty teacups and biscuits await. The setting is so unlike Dante, I find it nearly impossible not to laugh.

He pulls out a chair for me. “Welcome to my humble abode.”

I sit down, placing a white cloth napkin on my lap. This is so weird. There is no way he lives here. “It’s nice,” I say because I’m at a loss for words.

Dante takes a seat next to me while snapping his fingers. A frail, bent over man with dull gray skin enters the room.

“What is this?” He says to the man.

“Y-y-your b-brew and biscuits, sir,” the man replies.

“Do I like biscuits, Robert?” His voice is gentle, but his eyes narrow with displeasure.

“N-no, sir. I apologize, sir. I believe the chef just removed some scones from the oven. Would you prefer one of those, sir?” Robert asks.

“Obviously. Now remove these biscuits from my sight.” Dante dismisses him.

Robert’s hands shake, almost dropping the plate of biscuits. “My apologies, sir.”

As Robert steps back from the table, Dante grabs his arm, wrapping his long bony

fingers around his wrist. Robert's face goes from pale to ghostly white. His knees shake.

"I never want to see these biscuits again," Dante snarls, the tension around him palpable like the air before lightening strikes.

"Y-y-yes, sir." Before Robert shuffles away, I notice a wet spot forming at the crotch of his pants, leaking down his leg.

"Humans are so disgusting." Wiping his hands on a napkin, Dante faces me, a sparkle in his eye I don't trust. "So, tell me dear. What can I do for you?"

I get straight to the point. "I need you to trace me to the Dark Realm."

He giggles. "You are just delightful and brave. Tell me, child, why would you go to such a place?" There's something unsettling about the way he watches me, like he's always two steps ahead in a game no one else knows they're playing.

I open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off. He presses his palms together, bringing his index fingers to his lips. "Wait, let me guess."

His eyes are wide with excitement. "You're looking for that handsome mate of yours, am I right?"

"Yes, I..."

He cuts me off. "Of course I'm right. I always am," he says in a sing-song voice. "And what does a pretty, little thing like you plan on doing once you arrive?" His grin is malevolent, enjoying me squirm under his gaze.

"Find my mate. I don't care how dangerous it is. I will die for him and my brother."

“Eek,” he squeals, clapping his hands. “A real-life love story. Two mates go through literal hell to be together.”

Okay, well he hasn't said no yet, but I wish he would just answer me. “Will you help me?”

“I wouldn't stand in the way of true love. I will help you, child, but we must wait. I can trace you during the full moon. We can harness the energy to make it easier on you, being you're only half demon. It's only three days from now. You will be my guest until then.”

Wait. What? There is no freaking way I'm staying here. “I wouldn't want to intrude on your kindness. I'll go home and return in three days.” I stand up from my chair, searching for an exit.

As if he can read my mind he says, “It's not that terrible here. The beds are comfortable, and I could use the company. You will stay.” He stares at me with the intensity of a dog fixated on a bone, utterly obsessed.

I try finding an excuse to leave. “I don't have my things.”

“Don't be silly. We have everything a human would ever need. I'll have Robert bring you to your room.” He snaps his fingers twice, summoning his servant.

I don't see a way around his request. I don't have a vehicle here; not like I know where I am anyway being he traced us here. We could be in a different continent for all I know. Plus, I need to do this for Nate, for Zarreth. Reluctantly, I follow Robert up a flight of stairs and down a long hall. It looks like two completely different people decorated this place. For every painting of naked demons covered in blood, there is one with a beautiful woman surrounded by daisies. As we continue down the hall, I notice the woman is the same one in every painting.

Making our way up another flight of stairs, I try committing the way back to memory, but I'm already lost. I'll never find my way out. We finally arrive at my room, and I wait patiently as Robert fumbles with the key to the door.

I take the opportunity to get a better look at him. He's younger than I thought. Maybe in his forties. He's thin, his clothing way too baggy for him.

"I'm Frankie." I gently reach out my hand, not wanting to spook him.

He glances at me with tired eyes before reaching out his frail hand to shake mine. His knuckles are swollen, his fingers pointing in different directions.

His hand must have been broken multiple times and never taken care of. This poor man. I try calling forth healing magic to my palm, so I can soothe him, but nothing happens.

He keeps his eyes trained to the ground, like he's afraid to look directly at me. "I'm Robert," he says before quickly pulling his hand away. I don't think he's used to the kind of physical contact that doesn't come with a price.

"It's nice to meet you, Robert." I feel bad for him. I wonder how long he's been here.

We step inside the room and look around. It's enormous. A king-sized bed with a wrought iron frame and black silky canopy sits in the middle. The comforter is also black with deep red pillows and a matching throw blanket. The walls are dark gray, and skull shaped sconces holding red candles decorate the wall on both sides of the bed. It looks like Martha Stewart would sleep here if she were a vampire.

"Soap and shampoo are in there." Robert points to the bathroom door. "I will retrieve you in the morning."

Before leaving my room, he turns around, looking directly at me for the first time.
“B-be safe.”

I’m about to ask him what, specifically, I should watch for when he leaves, closing the door behind him. I hear the jingle of keys before realizing he’s locking me in.

“Wait!” I pound on the door, but there’s no response. Why is he locking me in? My gut sinks as I realize I may have made a mistake by coming here.

“Calm down, Frankie,” I say to myself. Zarreth said Dante was fierce but fair. He has no reason to hurt me. Maybe he’s locking me in for my safety. Who knows how many demons roam these halls. Plus, he wouldn’t let me have my phone if he planned on hurting me.

Laying on the bed, I look at my cell. Shit, my battery is at fifteen percent. I should’ve brought a charger, but I wasn’t thinking when I left.

I don’t look at the messages from Jess and Ronin. I already know what they’ll say. I debate texting Ronin, telling him I’m sorry, but I don’t want anyone talking me out of doing this.

I can’t believe I lost control earlier. If Ronin were human, I probably would have killed him. Regret hangs heavy on my heart. Why did I see him as a threat? Was it the mating bond making me this way, or are my powers turning dark? My mind races until my head pounds.

I close my eyes, intending to only rest them for a few minutes, but exhaustion takes over, sending me into a deep sleep.

It takes me a minute to remember where I am the next morning when the smell of bacon pulls me from my slumber. rubbing my eyes, I sit up in bed. Robert is staring

longingly at the bacon as he places the breakfast on the bedside table. His stomach growls loudly.

“Do you want some?” I ask.

“No ma’am,” he says, eyes downcast. “I shouldn’t.”

A bruise that wasn’t there yesterday covers his face. I wonder if Dante gave it to him for bringing biscuits instead of scones.

“What happened to your face?” I ask, gritting my teeth. If Dante hit him, I’ll...I quickly stop that train of thought. What could I possibly do against a demon older than Zarreth?

He brings his hand to his cheek. “I’m very clumsy, ma’am.”

“Robert, you can call me Frankie. It’s what my friends call me.”

He looks at me as a small smile appears. “Are we friends?”

“Of course.” My heart goes out to him. I couldn’t imagine living in a place like this. I would be happy to be his friend, even if it’s only for a few days.

“Master Dante has requested your presence at dinner tonight.” Robert points to the armoire. “There is a dress hanging in there. I will be back at seven to get you. Please be ready.” I look at the armoire sitting against the wall. Why is he having me dress up? Maybe it’s a demon thing.

“What should I do in the meantime?” He doesn’t expect me to just sit here with nothing to do, does he?

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” He closes the door, locking it.

Shit. I feel like Cinda-freaking-rella, except my prince is in another realm and instead of going to a fancy ball, I’m going to eat dinner with an old decrepit bastard who may or may not help me.

Panic flutters in my chest like a trapped bird. What the hell am I going to do when I get to the Dark Realm? I barely have any powers, and I have no idea what to expect. I should’ve thought this through more, but no one would help me, so this was my only choice. I have to save my loved ones.

The day drags by, and my phone eventually goes dead. Robert will be here soon to escort me to dinner, so I change into the black, slinky dress.

It reaches the floor but is anything but modest. The neckline cuts low between my breasts, nearly reaching my belly button. Silky fabric ties around my neck, leaving my back bare. I don’t see any shoes, so I slip my converse back on. By the time Robert arrives, I’m ready to go.

Before we leave the room, Robert reaches into his pocket, pulling out two bracelets. They’re simple. About an inch wide of solid gold. “Master would like you to wear these.”

“Why?” I don’t understand why I have to dress up in the first place. It’s not like we’re going to prom.

“We must do what Master says.” He unlatches the first bracelet, waiting for me to give him my wrist.

I hold out my arm. “Whatever.” I guess I can indulge him. Bracelets are the least of my problems.

As he fastens the second bracelet around my wrist, he looks me in the eye with a look I cannot decipher. "I'm sorry."

His eyes are full of remorse. What has this man endured? I don't want him to think I'm mad at him. "It's okay, Robert. I'm sure they look great with my sneakers." I attempt to reassure him.

We walk through the maze of hallways and stairs until we reach the dining room. I expect the room to be formal with an enormous table and oversized gothic chairs.

Instead, a vase of daisies sits in the middle of a round table draped in white linen. What is it with these daisies? An open bottle of wine is waiting to be poured.

Even though Dante is sitting, his large presence looms over the table. "Sit, sit." He's wearing a different tunic now. It's still black, but the fabric looks expensive. The tips of his black horns are painted silver.

Robert pulls out my chair as I take my seat. "Thank you, Robert."

He simply looks down, leaving the room.

"Don't go out of your way for my servants. They are beneath you," Dante says as he pours wine into our glasses.

I want to argue with him but it's probably best to keep my mouth shut.

He nods at my wrists. "I see you received my gift."

I look at the two gold cuffs. "Thank you for the kind gift, but it's unnecessary."

"Don't be silly. They are one of a kind. Perfect for a one-of-a-kind girl." He smirks as

if he's in on a secret.

That's weird. I shiver, hoping he doesn't think this is some sort of date. "So, how does tracing to different realms work, anyway?"

Confusion crosses his face before he laughs. "You don't honestly believe I'm going to let you leave now that I finally have you, do you?" His mask finally falling, leaving the look of pure malice in its place.

My heart rate increases while beads of sweat form along my hairline as his words sink in. "What do you mean?" I look around for the easiest way out of the room. Two guards stand at the entrance I came in. There is no other exit.

"It's nothing personal, dear. I'm an opportunist. The minute you kicked Zarreth out of your life, the future changed. I couldn't possibly let your talents go to waste. See, I'm trying to create an army of hellhound shifters, or hell-humans as your mate calls them. Now that I have unlimited access to minerals in the Dark Realm, thanks to your mate, all I need is you." He points at me with bony fingers resembling that of a skeleton.

My stomach drops. What have I gotten myself into? What does Zarreth have to do with minerals? "What are you talking about?"

Dante grins, rubbing his hands together. "Ooh, I'm so glad you asked. You see, the Dark Realm is rich with the minerals I need to make K4. I knew the only way Aradon would grant me access is if I had something valuable to exchange with him. Luckily for me, Aradon's favorite prisoner showed up asking for a traveler's mark."

Dread washes over me, the hair on my arms rising. "What did you do?" I yell, my voice shaking with anger.

Dante holds up his finger as he takes a drink. “Mmm, that’s so refreshing. I will have to tell my staff to get me more of this wine,” he says as if we’re engaged in a normal dinner conversation.

I tighten my jaw, talking through my teeth. “What did you do?” I repeat, pulling him back to our conversation.

He looks at me, surprised, like he forgot I was here, then chuckles. “Forgive me dear. I’m getting old; short attention span,” he says, setting his wine glass down. “Your silly mate thought I gave him an actual traveler’s mark. Like I would hand those out willy-nilly. No, what I gave him was a one-way ticket to the Dark Realm.”

A wave of terror washes over me. One-way ticket? No! How will he get back? “No!” I scream as I pound my fist on the table.

Dante continues, unbothered by my outburst. “I’m such a genius; I even programed exact coordinates in the mark so all I had to do was simply give his location to Aradon. I basically hand delivered him.”

I can’t hold back any longer. My hands curl into fists as I lunge at Dante. Before I realize what I’m doing, he slaps me across the face, sending me flying to the ground.

Ears ringing, I cup my cheek, hoping to ease the sting. It takes a moment for me to realize he’s still talking as if he didn’t strike me.

“Now that Zarreth is out of the way, we can focus on making my army.”

What the fuck is he talking about now. An army?

Dante relaxes back in his chair, crossing his legs. “The process is really quite simple. The human ingests the K4, and your powers will alter their biochemical makeup,

hopefully turning them into a hellhound shifter.” He pauses for a moment, like he’s thinking. “Unless you kill them, of course, which is a realistic possibility. I know your powers are still very new.”

Shapeshifters? He’s lost his mind. Especially if he thinks I would ever help him. I glare at him from the floor. “I’ll never help you. I would rather die.”

He snickers. “Oh, you’ll help me. I have my ways.”

If I act quickly, Dante won’t know what’s coming. I reach my hand toward him, latching onto his arm. Squeezing my eyes shut, I clench my jaw, trying to push my power into him.

Instead of the pins and needles that usually spread through my hands, my wrists burn like they’re on fire. I scream, quickly releasing him as I look down to see blisters forming around my wrists. What the hell?

Dante nods at my wrists. “When I said those bracelets are one of a kind, I meant it. No other ones exist in this realm.”

My eyes widen in disbelief as I stare at the two gold cuffs imprisoning my own powers. “What the fuck are these?”

“Silly me, did I forget to mention they were binding cuffs?”

Any hope I had of getting out of here quickly drains away. “I’ll fucking kill you.”

“That will be interesting considering your powers are useless with those on, and I’m the only one who can remove them.”

I panic, pulling at the cuffs, but they won’t come off.

“Robert,” Dante bellows, snapping his fingers. “Take Frankie to her room. I’m done with her for now.” He smiles down at me. “Welcome to your new home.”

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Zarreth

Distant shrieks pierce the silence as scorching hot winds lash my skin. The smell of rotting eggs burns my nostrils. I don't need to open my eyes to know I'm in the Dark Realm, but when I do, I find myself mere inches from molten lava.

I quickly push myself up, wiping ash from my clothing as I examine my surroundings. I spot a distant cave that would make a great shelter while I rest. I'm still weak from tracing to a different realm, so I begin walking, unable to trace again until my strength returns.

I forgot how shitty it is here. The sky is dark and hazy. The air is dry, and ash covers everything, making it difficult to breathe.

Anxiety courses through my body, making my chest ache. I worry about Frankie. I know Ronin will keep her safe, but something isn't right. Maybe she misses me and that's why my heart feels heavier. I rub my chest. Touching my mating mark has become a constant habit.

It's not long before I come across a hellhound. Luckily, it's too busy chewing on a freshly amputated arm to notice me. I quickly sneak up behind it and rip its head from its body, silently thanking the owner of the limb.

I think of Frankie as I continue walking, my heart longing for her. I wonder how her training with Ronin is going. He'll have his work cut out for him. I smile at the thought of how stubborn Frankie is. Gods, I miss her.

I let my mind wander to places it probably shouldn't, thinking of Frankie, not paying attention, when demons wearing armor representing the Death Horde surround me. Fuck!

I turn to the largest demon and launch myself at him, bringing us both to the ground. My powers have not yet returned, so I reach for a large boulder, quickly smashing his skull in. At the same time, demons trace around me, stabbing me over and over. I try fighting off each one as they come, but I'm bleeding out faster than I can blink. There are too many. Hundreds. Waiting as if they knew exactly where I would be.

This can't be happening. How did they know I was here? I look at the traveler's mark to find it's disappeared. Just before I pass out, I realize Dante set me up.

I wake up in my old cell, wincing as I push myself up, noting the binding cuffs on my wrists. My left wing hangs limp, the leathery membrane torn and tattered. The stab wounds are partially closed. They must have waited for the gashes to mend before cuffing me. It's easier to deal with a prisoner who's not dripping blood everywhere.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." I hear a familiar voice. "You may want to rest longer so you don't rip the gashes open again."

Squinting through blurry vision, I see a familiar figure. "Nate?" I cough. A part of me thought Aradon would have killed him by now. Fuck, it's good to see him alive, but how the hell did I get myself captured?

"I can't say I'm thrilled to see you here, but I'm glad you're alive," Nate says, the corner of his mouth tipping up, but his smile never reaches his eyes. "You were looking rough. I wasn't sure you would make it."

I finally turn myself, so I can fully see him. He's sitting with his back against the stone wall, his knees bent. He looks much older than when I last saw him, thin and

dirty. His bare feet have sores on them, and all his toenails are missing. “You look like shit.”

“What, you don’t like my new pedicure?” He jokes, looking at his toes.

“Not as much as I like your new roommates.” I nod at the two rats running around.

Chuckling, he points to the rats. “The brown one is Diggler, and the gray one is Shiggles.”

He and Frankie are so much alike. They name everything and have the same sense of humor. It’s nice to know his spirits haven’t been completely broken yet.

We spend the next hour catching up. Nate doesn’t think Aradon knows about Frankie yet. I’m assuming Dante won’t tell him. He won’t chance Aradon getting his hands on her. I clench my fists and punch the stone wall, bloodying my knuckles. I can’t wait to kill that fucker. What if he tries going after her himself?

My eyes must be turning black because Nate says, “Calm down, man. You got to keep your shit together. You know those fucking cuffs won’t let you do anything, anyway.”

I growl. Nate’s right. I need to focus on getting us out of here.

“So, you and my sister, huh?” he asks, a scrutinizing look on his face.

I raise my eyebrows at him. “How’d you know?” I didn’t mention Frankie being my mate.

“It sounds like you earned her trust, which isn’t easy, so I figure she must be into you. Also, that big dumb look on your face every time I say her name kind of gives you

away.”

I shake my head, schooling my features, hating that I look like a fucking schoolgirl at the mention of her name.

He laughs. “So, how serious is it? Do I need to whip your ass or anything?”

I pull down the collar of my bloodstained shirt, revealing the mating mark. It’s ironic how the tattered wings tattooed over my chest match the tattered wings at my back.

Nate’s eyes widen, his teasing demeanor gone. “What the...is that what I think it is?”

Our conversation stops as we hear footsteps outside our cell. “Shit!” Nate trembles as he backs into a corner, covering his head with his arms. What the hell have they done to him? But I don’t need to ask. I already know.

The door opens and two guards enter. Instead of going for Nate, they hold me down, chaining my cuffs together behind my back. They place shackles around my ankles and drag me from the cell. I shuffle down the hall with a guard gripping each elbow. Every cell we pass holds multiple demons. They have all been tortured in one way or another.

“Aradon has missed his favorite toy,” one of my escorts says as we head toward Aradon’s chambers. I grit my teeth, seething at the nickname.

We step through the heavy iron door, grotesque statues standing guard on either side. Aradon sits in a massive throne carved from blackened bone, covered in crimson gems.

He stands and walks to the center of the room. His black robe flows behind him as he prowls toward me. Huge gray horns curl forward on both sides of his head. His black

hair is braided down the middle of his back.

He smirks when he makes eye contact with me. “Kneel, Maggot.”

Instead of kneeling, I turn to the guard who called me Aradon’s toy and slam my head into his nose. I know I’ll pay for that, but it’s worth watching the blood drip down his face.

He lets go of me, grabbing his nose while the other guard holds a knife to my neck. “He said, kneel.” I tilt my head, the cold steel of the blade digging into my throat.

Next thing I know the fucker I head-butted takes a swing at me, connecting his fist with my face, breaking my nose. He then takes my breath away as he punches me in the gut, ripping open my wounds and forcing me to my knees.

“I always liked your fearlessness. It makes it more enjoyable when I break you.” Aradon walks closer to me. Bending low, he whispers, “I can’t believe you thought you could escape.”

I smile before spitting blood in his face. “Seems to me, I did escape. Quite easily, in fact.” I grin, making sure he sees my blood-stained teeth. I’m not afraid of this fucker.

Taking a step back, he wipes his face with his sleeve, laughing. “Do you really believe it’s a coincidence you’re back in my dungeon? Have you learned nothing?” He gets back in my face. “Whether it’s this realm or another, I will always own you.”

I bare my teeth at him, enunciating my words. “You will never own me.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you. See, Dante was quick to become my ally once he learned how valuable the minerals here in the Dark Realm are. He will do anything

for me if I continue providing him with the ingredients needed to make his pitiful drug operation successful. He was so eager to prove his loyalty, he practically hand delivered you to me.” His eyes dance as he speaks.

A low growl emanates from my throat. I can’t believe I was dumb enough to trust Dante, but what other choice did I have? He was my only option to get to Nate.

Bringing his fingertips to his head as if he just remembered something important, he says, “He also mentioned something about a cute, little brunette who happens to be your mate. Frankie, is it?”

“Don’t say her name again!” I growl, trying to break myself free, my wings splaying.

“I will never understand why demons concern themselves with mere humans,” Aradon says. “Apparently, she’s a good fuck because Dante plans to keep her around for a while. He mentioned something about using her as a reward to incentivize his army. It’s a shame she’s your mate, though. It must be tough knowing she’s being passed around from demon to demon.” His words are sharp, laced with an unmistakable threat.

Letting loose a loud roar, I pull against the cuffs, trying to break free. “No!” I snarl, snapping my jaws in Aradon’s direction. “Mark my words, when I get out of here, I will fucking destroy you.” I’ll burn this whole gods damn realm to the ground if I have to.

Aradon chuckles, before turning to his guards. “Do your thing.”

One guard kicks me in the face, and soon the others join him. They stab me repeatedly, again, trying to weaken me so Aradon can remove my cuffs. I don’t feel the pain, though. All I can focus on is Frankie. He’s lying. Ronin will protect her with his life. I know he will.

“That’s enough,” Aradon orders, holding up his hand once he’s certain I’m too weak to fight back. My vision tunnels as I struggle to stay conscious, the noise around me fading into the distance.

The guards back off, leaving me in a pool of my own warm blood. My nose is broken, along with a few ribs. One of my lungs must be punctured because I can barely breathe.

Aradon presses his thumbs to the cuffs, making them fall to the ground. The minute my wrists are free, my powers begin sparking to life, but I’m not strong enough to stop him from getting into my head. A familiar darkness slithers into my mind as my powers fade away.

“Come to me, Maggot,” he orders.

No matter how hard I resist, I can’t stop myself from crawling on my hands and knees. I stop only when I reach his feet, unable to pull away.

His eyes sparkle as his hand drifts down to his crotch, a clear but unspoken message. “Now that Ronin is missing, you’ll have to service my personal needs.”

Fuck! Ronin never told me how Aradon tortured him. He would often avoid my eyes when he tended my wounds, but I could see how haunted he was. I knew he had his own type of torture. I just didn’t know it was this.

A smug look crosses his face. “For a gay male, he gives lousy head. Of course, it could be because of the choke collar I made him wear. Now, unfasten my belt.”

He’s enslaved every part of my mind. My hands move of their own accord to his belt, pulling open his robe as if I’m watching someone else do it. My mind screams at me to stop as I grab his cock, vomit burning the back of my throat.

Aradon grabs my face, forcing me to look up at him.

“Wait.” He takes a step back, as my shoulders sag with relief. “What am I thinking? I don’t want to rush this new relationship we’re about to embark on.” He pulls a knife from his boot, handing it to me. “Why don’t you cut your horns off instead?”

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Frankie

After the dreadful dinner with Dante, I crawl into bed and press my hand to my chest. The bond with Zarreth feels weaker. I wonder if it's because we're in different realms. Closing my eyes, I focus on the warmth of my mating mark, tears falling till sleep takes me away.

The next morning, two demons enter my room. I recognize the one with a missing eye from the night Zarreth and I met Dante. Cronus was his name. His presence alone makes my skin crawl, and it has nothing to do with his appearance.

"Come with us." They each take an arm, escorting me from the room.

"What's this? Another fancy dinner date? Whatever will I wear?" I can't help the sarcasm in my voice. Jess always says I turn to humor instead of dealing with what's in front of me. I guess she's right.

The demon to my left laughs before muttering in my ear. "I wouldn't tempt Lord Cronus if I were you. He would love nothing more than to have you for a fancy dinner."

An audible gulp leaves my throat.

Cronus leans toward me, inhaling deeply. "Smells like fear, my favorite."

I bring my eyes to his as he stops walking. Pushing me against the wall, his putrid breath making me want to vomit, he leans in, hissing, "I can't wait to have a piece of

you.”

I turn my head, thinking he’s going to kiss me. Instead, Cronus spits in my face, laughing as he releases me. I grit my teeth, thankful I’m able to keep my temper in check, as I wipe away his saliva with my sleeve.

Anger surges through me, yet it’s not enough to tamp down my fear. My knees wobble, making it difficult to walk as they lead me through a basement.

Screams come from behind the doors on both sides of the hallway. I wonder how many people are down here. How many lives have been upended, families torn apart, because of Dante?

We reach the end of the hallway and enter an open room. Shackles hang on the stone walls, and a workbench holding multiple tools sits in the middle of the room.

“Your date will not care what you’re wearing.” Cronus nods at a frail man hanging on the far wall. His wrists are restrained with his head resting on his chest. I can’t tell if he’s dead or alive.

The other guard walks up to the man, slapping him across the face. “Wake up,” he bellows. The chained man groans, the links to his binds clanking.

Dante enters the room with Robert in tow. “Time for your training. This will be exciting, don’t you think?” His eyes dancing as he claps with excitement.

“I can barely contain myself.” What is wrong with me? Why am I talking back?

Dante looks amused but thankfully ignores my remark.

“It’s simple.” He pulls a small plastic container from his pocket, holding it up. “Once

this pathetic bag of bones ingests the K4, it will immediately work its way through his body. All you need to do is use your powers to scramble up his insides.” He gestures to the frail man’s body. “The K4 will take care of the rest and within minutes he’ll be a hell-human, or dead.”

“What if I can’t?” My voice shakes. My powers are hit or miss. Why does he think I’m so capable of using them? My eyes bounce around the room, finally connecting with Robert’s. There must be a way out of this.

“Then poor Robert, here, will lose a limb.” My eyes snap back to Dante.

Cronus holds up a pair of large gardening shears to prove his point. Robert shakes with fear but doesn’t make a sound.

“I’m going to remove your cuffs. Don’t do anything stupid. You’ll regret it,” Dante sings, clasping his hands together.

I don’t want any part of this, but I can’t be the reason Robert loses a limb. “I won’t do anything stupid,” I promise, my eyes locked on Robert.

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel a knife at my throat keeping me in check.

Dante presses the first cuff with his thumb, and I hear a click as it unlatches. He passes the cuff to the guard standing behind me before removing the second one.

I rub my hands together, my fingers tingling more than they ever have before. My powers must have grown since I’ve been here.

Dante removes a yellow strip from the container before grabbing the man’s hair and lifting his head, shoving it in his mouth. “Now,” he tells me.

The man's eyes instantly turn red, and fangs grow from his mouth. A deep growl rumbles from his throat, as he pulls violently at the shackles. The guards push the man against the wall to keep him from thrashing around.

I scream as I try taking a step back, but the guard with the knife to my throat holds me in place. "Now, Frankie," Dante commands.

I have no idea what to do, so I extend my arms and grit my teeth, trying to summon my power. The man tugs at his chains in a frenzy, gnashing his newly formed fangs in my direction. He breaks one of the shackles, drawing an ear-splitting scream from my throat, as his jaw snaps, eyes fixated on me.

A guard quickly produces a syringe, the movements practiced, refined, as if they have done this many times before. Swiftly stabbing it into his neck, the man falls to the floor, unconscious. I watch in a trance as they drag him out of sight.

"Did it work?" I ask, my eyes not leaving the empty doorway the man disappeared into.

"Unfortunately, no," Dante sulks. "But lucky for you, we have plenty to practice on."

"But he had fangs and was snarling at me."

"That's what happens when someone takes K4. They grow fangs and descend into a state of delirium, but unlike a true shifter, they can't be controlled. They can't shift from human to hellhound. Instead, they're stuck in this in-between state. They're basically useless." He nods at the man. "He'll be destroyed."

I'm appalled by the blatant disregard for human life. How can someone be so cruel? How is this my life? I can't believe I'm a part of this. I'm responsible for this poor man's life.

Dante picks up the shears, handing them to Cronus. “Lord Cronus, please do me the honor.”

“I would be happy to, my lord.”

“No, please! I tried,” I plead. “I swear I tried. Please don’t hurt him.”

“Frankie, Frankie, Frankie,” Dante reprimands, shaking his head. “Maybe this will motivate you to try harder.” He looks at Cronus, nodding.

Cronus turns the shears over in his hands as he walks toward Robert. Robert cowers but doesn’t attempt to run. Cronus grabs his hand, and with a gleam in his eye, cuts off Robert’s little finger.

Robert screams, dropping to the floor. Blood pours down his elbow as he holds his hand close to his body.

“Please! Oh my God! No. I’m so sorry.” Sobbing, I run over to Robert and grab his hand, applying pressure to stop the bleeding. “Help him!” I yell, glaring around the room.

“Stop being dramatic, Frances,” Dante says before he turns to Cronus. “Take Robert away from here. His pathetic cries are distracting Frankie.”

Cronus escorts Robert from the room. At the same time, a different guard enters with a girl who looks close to my age. She’s too weak to walk, so he drags her to the shackles.

This time he places a restraint over her forehead so she can’t move at all. Once she’s secure, he steps to the side, readying another syringe.

The girl's eyes meet mine, but I can tell she doesn't see me. She's in her own world, and I pray she doesn't realize what's happening. Closing my eyes, I bring my hands together, concentrating on bringing power to my palms.

"Please focus this time, Frankie. It's much easier for Robert to serve me with all his fingers," Dante says.

He removes another yellow strip before placing it in the girl's mouth. I don't waste any time. Immediately placing my hands around her neck, I clench my jaw, focusing on how badly I want to end Dante's miserable life as he has ended so many others.

My skin turns hot as pins and needles spread through my hands into my chest and neck. My ears ring as my vision tunnels, almost passing out.

"That's enough," Dante says. "Your powers are very unstable, but don't be discouraged, we'll keep trying."

I open my eyes to a limp, lifeless girl. Blood flows from her eyes, ears, and nose. "No! I-I...I killed her!"

I sob. What have I become? What am I doing to these poor people? Am I just as bad as Aradon or Dante?

The next two days are spent in agonizing guilt. I only leave my room to practice my powers. And when I say practice my powers, I mean kill more innocent people. I've spent my entire life trying to be good, to be a better person than my mother. Now look at me.

I finally stabilized the K4 enough to create two shifters. I feel worse for turning people into monsters than I do for killing them. Their humanity is gone either way. At least those who die can move on to whatever afterlife they believe in. The shifters are

stuck living in absolute misery.

Dante keeps them in separate cells in the dungeon. I pass them every day on my way to the torture chambers where I create the abominations. They're huge. Their heads are nearly chest level when they're on all fours. Black, patchy fur covers their ridged spines. Their yellow eyes are lifeless with no intelligence behind them. Multiple rows of sharp teeth fill their jaws.

But their human form. That is downright terrifying. Their skin is almost translucent, making their veins completely visible. The abnormal number of sharp teeth prevents their jaws from closing, making saliva drip from their fangs. Their fingers are long, extending into sharp claws.

Other than Robert bringing me food, I'm left alone to think about the evil I created, the lives I took. I'm a monster. I don't deserve to live. If it wasn't for the warmth of my mating mark letting me know Zarreth is still out there, I would have easily taken my life by now.

Instead, I focus on how the hell I'm going to get out of here. Robert is the only one I can overpower while wearing these cuffs. I don't want to hurt him, but if it's a choice between me or him, I will choose me; it's the only way I'll make it back to Zarreth.

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Frankie

I pace the room, looking for something I can use as a weapon. The wall sconces look heavy duty. Maybe I can knock Robert on the head with one when he brings my next meal.

Removing the candle from one of the sconces, I scream when the jaw flaps open. The skull I thought was fake is actually made of bone.

Jerking my hands back in disgust, I flap my arms. “Ew, ew, ew, what the hell? Why can’t I get the room with the dainty teacups instead of human skulls?”

Think, Frankie. This is not the time to panic . Finding my resolve, I reach for the skull again, removing it from the wall. Shit! It’s lighter than I expected; too light to do any damage.

Maybe I can carve it into a knife of some sort. I smash the skull on the ground over and over until a chunk breaks free. Grabbing the hook that was used to hang the skull, I use it to whittle away at the bone.

My door opens around dinnertime, and Robert enters carrying the usual tray of food. The only thing I can’t complain about is being fed. Dante wants to make sure I have enough energy to use my magic, so I haven’t gone hungry yet. Silver linings, I guess.

I’m sitting on the bed with the make-shift knife tucked under my leg, waiting for Robert to come closer.

He sets the tray on the side table and removes the lid, revealing some sort of meatloaf and potatoes. "I can eat the bread for you if you want," he says.

Robert has come to trust me over the past few days, which makes this a lot harder. I pretend I don't like bread so he'll eat it for me. I know he doesn't get enough food, so I'm more than happy to share.

As he reaches for the slice of bread, I quickly hop up, grabbing his arm.

"F-F-Frankie?!" he exclaims, eyes wide with confusion.

I spin him around, so his back is against me and hold the sharp pointy bone to his throat. "I'm so sorry, Robert. I don't want to hurt you."

He grunts, trying to fight me off, but he's too weak. "I need to get out of here. Show me where to go."

"M-M-Master will kill me," he pleads.

I press the knife deeper into his neck. "I will kill you if you don't help me. Please, Robert. You can come with me. You don't have to live this way." He could stay with me, start over and have a fulfilling life.

"Master will kill you too. We can't leave."

We'd both be better off dead. I can't live this way. "I don't want to hurt you, Robert, but I will. Show me the way out, or I'll kill you now, ending your misery."

I watch him debating, wondering if he should take the easy way out and end his life. I wouldn't blame him if he did.

“This way,” he finally says as we exit the room. I breathe a sigh of relief when he decides to help me.

I keep him at knifepoint. If we get caught, I don’t want him to be punished for helping me.

He leads us through dark, empty halls into the library. I release him as the door closes. Shelves full of books line the walls from floor to ceiling. In another lifetime, this would’ve been a dream instead of a nightmare.

Robert feels around until he finds a hidden lever disguised as a book. I hear a loud click as the bookshelf opens, revealing a hidden hallway.

Sweat begins forming around my hair line and a chill runs down my spine the moment I step inside. My hands tremble as the tightness in my chest makes it impossible to breathe. The door closes behind me, leaving us in a narrow, dark space.

Panic takes over and instead of following Robert, I turn back to the hidden door, pushing it open. Stupid claustrophobia.

“It’s okay, Frankie,” I say to myself, resting my hands on my knees to catch my breath. “You’re not in the pantry, you’re safe.”

“Why aren’t you in your room?” A deep voice makes me jump. I look up to find Cronus, his eyes narrowed on me. He reaches out to grab my arm, but I pull it away, running toward the library exit.

I’m only inches from the doorknob when a strong arm wraps around my waist, pulling me away.

Warm breath tickles my ear as the voice whispers, “Dante doesn’t like to share, but I

figured as his second in command, I earned a little piece.”

I cringe in disgust, surprising us both when I swing my elbow, hearing a crunch as it connects with Cronus’ nose. He loosens his grip, and I manage to pull away.

Dashing for the door once more, he tackles me to the ground, sending the knife flying from my hand.

“This is going to be fun,” he says before flipping me over to face him. A disgusting smile spreads across his face.

“L-l-let her go,” Robert cries.

Cronus ignores Robert as he unbuckles his belt, opening the front of his pants.

No! I push at his chest, but he doesn’t budge. He holds me to the ground. I kick and punch with as much strength as I can muster, but I can’t stop him from ripping down my pants.

Cronus pins my legs down with his own while holding my wrists with one of his hands. I scream relentlessly. Please, God, don’t let this happen to me.

He’s too massive. No matter how hard I struggle, I can’t get free.

Cronus sneers as he pulls himself out of his pants. “I’m going to fuck you real hard! You’ll forget all about that mate of yours.”

“No!!” I thrash violently. It takes me a moment to realize he repositioned me. My legs are now splayed on top of his.

Think, Frankie. You’re not weak. What was that move Zarreth made me learn?

Triangle choke! Dammit, I wish I would've paid more attention.

He reaches down positioning himself at my entrance. "I'm gonna get nice and deep."
No, no, no.

This is my only chance. I place my left foot on his leg, pushing to the side, while simultaneously wrapping my right leg around his neck. I grab the arm holding his disgusting penis, pulling it across his body. Before he realizes what's happening, my left leg hooks over my right ankle and I'm locked in. I'm so thankful Zarreth didn't give up on me that day.

Cronus tries pulling himself loose, but I squeeze my legs tighter. Grabbing onto his horns, I pull with all my might, trying to cut off his airflow, but he's too strong. I can't hold him.

Roaring, he pulls his head back. I open my eyes to find Robert holding the bone-knife. The blood seeping from Cronus' neck is the last thing I see before he punches me and everything goes black.

When I come to, Cronus has Robert by the throat. Footsteps are approaching, and soon Dante enters the room followed by his goons.

"Unhand him," Dante orders.

"Boss, he stabbed me in the neck. I'm only returning the favor," Cronus explains.

Dante sighs dramatically. "Oh Cronus, if you're dumb enough to let Robert stab you, then you deserve it." He points at one of his guards. "You, take Frankie and Robert to the dungeon. I'll deal with Cronus."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

The stench of rotting flesh oozing from my wounds nearly covers the smell of Aradon's cigar. My horns are displayed on his desk like a hard-earned trophy. Next to them are my binding cuffs and a pile of thick textbooks.

Aradon's nose is in a book, researching something that has his full attention. I sit in a corner popping my fingernails off one by one with his knife. What I wouldn't give to stab him in the face with it.

"Once you have finished removing your last nail, soak your hands in that bucket of sulfuric acid," he orders, nodding to the metal bucket sitting next to me.

I do as he says, unable to resist his mind control. It fucking hurts, but I grit my teeth, bearing it. I remain silent through the suffering, not giving him an ounce of my pain. I don't want him to have that satisfaction.

Every night Aradon brings me to his chambers to torture me in various ways just like he did before I escaped. It's only a matter of time before he'll remove my wings. I hope being in different realms makes my bond with Frankie weak enough so she doesn't feel my pain.

Sweat beads down my forehead as every nerve ending in my fingers throbs in searing agony. My mind is screaming for me to pull my hands away.

Finally, Aradon waves his hand, allowing me to remove mine from the bucket. He walks over, preparing to say something when a cloud of smoke appears, revealing a

demon covered in blood.

I sigh in relief when Aradon loses his train of thought, turning around to address the demon. “What do you want?”

“Sir, we have a problem,” the demon says. He has a traveler’s mark so he must be one of Aradon’s spies.

“Well don’t just stand there, tell me,” Aradon snaps.

“The Recreants attacked our troops at the northern border. They killed everyone and set up camp.”

I perk up at the mention of my horde. The Recreants are rebelling again? How many are there? Do we even have an army big enough to do anything?

Aradon slams his fist on the desk. “How is that possible? They haven’t been active in years.”

“I don’t know, sir.” The demon’s voice tremors as he shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“How did you not see this coming? Your only job is to gain intel on our enemies. You disappoint me. Leave before I have the maggot disembowel you.”

Aradon barely finishes his sentence before the runner disappears, leaving behind a cloud of smoke.

He looks my way. “What do you know about this?” he growls.

An eerie smile spreads across my face. I don’t know what my horde is up to, but I

don't tell him that. It pisses him off that he can't force me to talk. His powers may control my body, but they will never infiltrate my mind.

"I will deal with you later," he seethes. "Guards!"

The doors to his chambers fly open and two guards approach me. Aradon reapplies my cuffs and has me escorted back to my cell.

We walk past two commanders who look to be in a hurry. "Are you sure it's female?" one of them says to the other.

Fuck! I don't know for sure if they're talking about Frankie, but I can't take any chances. I need to stop them from getting to Aradon's chambers.

Quickly turning to the guard on my right, I wrap the chain attached to my cuffs around his neck and pull. I'm weak, but I manage to pull the chain tight enough that it cuts through his flesh, severing his head from his body. Blood spurts everywhere, covering me in a crimson shower.

The second guard has already traced away before his friend's head hits the ground.

The two commanders rush to my side, but I don't have enough strength to fight them off. They quickly contain me and trace me back to Aradon's chambers.

Aradon is leaning over a map, shouting orders to the demons surrounding him.

"What is this?" he shouts when he sees me again. "Why isn't he in his cell?"

"Lord Aradon, he killed Marbas," one of the commanders says.

"Who's Marbas?" Aradon asks, annoyance lacing his voice.

“One of your guards, sir,” he answers.

Aradon huffs, rubbing his temples as he looks at me. “If watching you mutilate yourself every night didn’t bring me so much pleasure, I would have you beheaded.” He looks at his commanders. “Take him to the hole.”

Fuck!

They quickly gather a group of guards and trace me to the hole. Aradon gives them permission to beat me before throwing me in. His only stipulation being they have to keep me alive.

“This is for Marbas.” A guard kicks me in the head.

“You’re lucky you’re Aradon’s favorite toy or I would rip your head off, Maggot.” That’s the last thing I hear before I’m kicked into the hole.

I fall about fifteen feet before hitting the ground. I catch a small glimpse of dirt walls surrounding me before the door above slams shut, leaving me in total darkness.

I should be thankful Aradon is keeping me alive. As long as Frankie lives, I have reason to keep breathing.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

“When light fades and shadows play, the Realm Eater comes to take you away.” Nancy’s beady little eyes drill into mine as she sings the stupid fucking nursery rhyme she has sang every day since Robert and I were thrown into this cell.

My bruises are now yellow, so I figure at least a week has passed since we tried escaping.

I squat over the five-gallon bucket holding our feces, trying not to gag. Apparently, the makeshift toilet is new to this cell. Before we arrived, the cement floor was the only place to relieve yourself. I guess I should be thankful for the special treatment.

“Shut the fuck up, Nancy.” I pull up my ripped pants and step around Robert. He insists on blocking me from the others when I use the toilet. His kindness makes me feel weird. I don’t deserve it.

“One of these days Robert won’t be here to protect you, Realm Eater, and I will kill you for turning my daughter into one of those vile creatures,” threatens Nancy.

Her daughter was the first female I turned into a hellhound. She was different from the others. Most prisoners are unaware of what happens to them. If they are aware, they beg for death.

But Nancy’s daughter was young, spirited. She had the will to live and was not easily broken. She fought hard, though it did her no good.

“Take it easy on her, Nancy. She’s a prisoner like us. I would like to see you refuse orders when Dante is barking them at you,” says Jeff.

“Let’s see if you’re still defending her when she kills you. Or worse, turns you into a shifter,” she barks before repeating the eerie nursery rhyme, making my skin crawl.

I walk to my corner of the cell, sitting on the hard cement. My tailbone feels bruised from sitting for so long. The ‘toilet’ is the only thing in the cell. There are no mattresses or blankets, so Robert and I cuddle at night to keep warm.

Footsteps echo off the stone walls as a guard walking down the hall bangs on every door he passes. “Eeny meeny miny moe, catch a dead man by his toe.” He stops singing, and soon we hear keys jingle as he opens a door.

A panicked voice comes from the cell. “Not me! Please not me! I’ll do anything!”

This has been the routine every day since I tried escaping. I hear people begging for their lives before I’m brought to the torture chamber to make shifters. Only a third of them survive. What scares me more than anything though, is I’ve become numb to it.

When the door to our cell opens, my three cellmates cower in a corner.

The guard nods at me. “Come.”

I follow him down the hall. I don’t fight it anymore. It’s pointless.

Instead of the usual chamber, we enter a room divided by plexiglass. Demons fill the stadium seats in our half of the room. We walk down the stairs, and when we reach the front row, the guard shoves me to my knees.

A man is strapped to the opposite side of the plexiglass. There is a round hole cut in

the glass, giving us access to the man's mouth and throat. I make eye contact with him, and he grimaces. "Please don't turn me. I'm begging you. Let me die."

Two shifters are contained in separate plexiglass rooms connected to the main room. They snarl, jumping at the glass, trying to escape so they can rip the man to shreds. The only mercy I can show him is to kill him.

Dante appears in front of the audience. He's making some sort of announcement, but I'm too busy focusing on my powers to hear what he's saying.

Shutting my eyes, I focus on sending energy to my hands. My wrists begin to blister from the cuffs, but I endure it. I need to gather all my power so I can kill the man instead of turning him into a hellhound. He doesn't deserve to be ripped apart in front of these disgusting demons. The death I offer will be much quicker.

Dante stops speaking and removes my cuffs. He administers the K4, and I wrap my hands around the man's neck. I watch the life leave his eyes as I push my power into him.

His body twitches a few more times before it goes limp against the glass. The straps prevent him from falling to the ground.

I release my hands, taking a step back. I just killed someone's father or husband. I rub my chest, reminding myself of the reason I need to keep going. The only reason I have left to live.

A mixture of cheers and boos erupt from the crowd as the demons who bet on the man living pay the ones who did not.

The shifters are released, and they fight over the dead body. The crowd continues to cheer as one shifter kills the other. When it dies, it turns back to its human form. I

recognize the shifter as Nancy's daughter.

I hold back tears, focusing on what Dante is saying. A party is happening tonight where the guests are not expected to leave alive. Shit! I should've paid more attention.

When I get back to my cell, I find Nancy sitting in a corner chewing on her nails. What am I going to tell her? I don't want to hurt her any more than I have, but she deserves to know the truth. Maybe she'll find comfort knowing her daughter is no longer suffering at the hands of demons.

"Where are Robert and Jeff?" I ask once the guard leaves.

"Why are you asking? Are you scared now that they're not here to defend you?" Nancy snarls.

"I'm so sorry about your daughter, Nancy. I really am. I hate the things I'm forced to do." My voice cracks with guilt.

Nancy stands and walks over to me. "You don't hate yourself nearly as much as I hate you."

Her fingers are clenched in a fist with something sharp protruding between her knuckles.

Taking a couple steps back, I hold my hands up in surrender. I don't want to fight Nancy, but she swings her fist, hitting me in the temple.

I grab the side of my head as sharp pain shoots through it. When I pull my hand away, blood covers my fingertips.

“Please, Nancy!” I beg. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“That’s fine. I’ll kill you either way.” She lunges at me again.

I grab her arms, trying to hold her back, but using my powers has made me weak.

She stabs me again in the neck, making me scream in pain.

Pulling her hair, I force her to the ground. We wrestle around until I knock the nail away from her.

I crawl to the five-gallon bucket holding our feces. Nancy grabs my ankle as she sinks her teeth into my calf. Fuck! I manage to kick her in the face with my other leg before standing up.

I grab the bucket, swinging it at Nancy’s head as she tries standing up. She falls back when it connects with the side of her temple, covering us both in shit and piss.

Breathing hard, I drop the bucket, and rest my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. “Please, Nancy. This doesn’t have to happen.” I have the upper hand now, but I don’t want to hurt her.

Footsteps stomp down the hall getting closer and closer.

“Kill me, please,” Nancy begs. “Before they get here.”

I hesitate. I don’t want to kill anymore. I’ve become a monster. “You owe me this much,” she pleads.

With that, I place my hands over Nancy’s nose and mouth. “You’ll be with your daughter soon,” I reassure her.

Nancy's body begins to jerk. Her feet kick as she pulls at my hands. I want to let go, but I owe her this mercy.

Closing my eyes, I continue blocking her airway until she's no longer moving. Bile rises in my stomach as I pull away, realizing what I've done.

I'm a fucking monster. I willingly killed two people today. I wait for the tears to come, but there are none. I feel nothing. I'm empty.

I rub my mating mark, praying for emotion to come. What if I don't come back from this? What if I feel empty forever? What if killing no longer makes me sad?

"What the fuck! I'm not cleaning this shit up." I didn't hear the guard open the door and enter. I vaguely register that he's talking to me.

I'm numb inside. Commotion is happening around me, but all I hear is buzzing in my head as I'm escorted back to my old room.

"Clean yourself up," a guard barks. "You can't be covered in shit at the party tonight."

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Frankie

Scalding hot water beats over my naked body. My skin is bright red, but I don't register the heat.

Rocking back and forth on the shower floor, I sing the twisted nursery rhyme over and over. "When light fades and shadows play, the Realm Eater comes to take you away."

Cronus throws a bar of soap at me. "Wash that shit off you. You're fucking disgusting."

I don't respond. I don't even look in his direction. Instead, I continue rocking. "When light fades and shadows play, the Realm Eater comes to take you away."

Cronus grabs my hair, pulling me to my feet. "You don't want to listen? Fine, I'll clean that dirty little cunt for you."

He slides the side of his hand up and down the folds between my legs. I shudder, pushing it away as he slams me against the shower wall, the back of my head smacking against the tile.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be," he seethes through clenched teeth. I grab my head, trying to ease the sharp pain.

Cronus uses a claw to outline my mating mark. "I can't believe Zarreth is mated to the likes of you. Maybe I should do him a favor and remove the mark from your

skin.”

I launch myself forward, taking a swing at his head, but he backhands me before I connect, sending me to the ground. Curling into a ball, I whimper as he runs his repulsive soapy hands over my body.

I hear him disconnect the showerhead, using it to rinse away the soap. “Get up,” he commands.

I ignore him.

“Fuck it, see what happens if you don’t show up tonight. I’m done with you.” He stomps from the room as I lay here, wishing I was dead.

I’m still laying on the shower floor when Robert enters my room, but I don’t move. I hear a strange noise coming from him when he kneels beside me, but I don’t look at him.

He shakes me, making another weird sound, this one more urgent than the last.

He pulls away, his footsteps receding. A few seconds later, I feel him wrap a towel around my naked body. Turning my head, I finally focus my eyes on him.

His eyes are bruised and swollen. Dried, flakey blood covers his chin and mouth. Somewhere in the back of my mind I wonder what happened to him, but I’m too numb to ask.

Robert opens his mouth to say something, but all that comes out are droplets of blood and a muffled rasping sound.

Wincing, I wearily push myself up, hesitantly reaching my hand out, grabbing Robert

by the chin.

I nearly vomit when he opens his mouth. His tongue is missing. Only a small chunk of swollen, black flesh remains where it was cauterized to stop the bleeding.

I drop my hand, pulling Robert close, knowing we both need the contact. We hold each other and cry. “I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I never should have forced you to help me escape.”

Robert shakes his head. He tries mumbling something, but the words don’t come out right.

Just then, we hear a knock at the door. “You have ten minutes. You better be ready.”

I wonder what will happen if I stay here, never coming out. I don’t know if I can handle this much longer, but I look over at Robert, knowing if I don’t attend the party, he will pay the price.

Robert turns his back, giving me privacy while I change into the black dress I wore when I first arrived. I somehow manage to wash my face and braid my hair.

When I’m ready, Robert escorts me to the large banquet room. Tables are decorated with red linen and Dante’s signature daisies are spread throughout the room. People interact as if nothing is wrong, as if there aren’t monsters being created in the basement of this very house.

The black, shiny floor looks freshly polished. Large pillars with intricate carvings are evenly spread along the sides of the room. A chandelier made of bone hangs from the tall, vaulted ceiling. Pointed arches frame each doorway where two guards are posted on both sides. A string quartet is playing in the corner as masked people dance with one another.

I guess the costume party is meant to disguise the demon servers, and it's working. Everyone seems at ease, despite my stomach twisting into tight knots. The atmosphere is light and fun while my soul is heavy and dark. Are people really this naive?

"Aw, there she is. The guest of honor." Dante walks over to me. I don't react. I think I'm hollow inside.

He's wearing all black with a red cape draped over his shoulders. His horns have been painted the same shade of red as the cape. "You know, Frankie, this night will be easier if you behave for once. You may even enjoy it."

He leads us to a raised platform holding two large thrones made of some sort of black wood. Velvet fabric lines the insides. A table sits between the two thrones, with a single covered plate resting in the middle. Guards line both sides of the dais with even more spread throughout the room.

"Sit, sit," Dante says. "Have a glass of champagne."

I take the glass from his hand, but don't take a drink.

He frowns, annoyance framing his features. "You can trust me, My Queen. Why would I poison my most prized possession? With you by my side, I can rule not only the Human Realm, but every realm in existence."

"I will never be your queen," I hiss.

Bringing his face to my ear like we're lovers, he breathes, "Have it your way. If you refuse to be my queen, you will continue to be my prisoner. Either way, you'll be under my control. Now do as you're told, or Robert will pay the price. He can't afford to lose many more limbs."

Pulling back, I turn to look at Robert standing behind us, when I catch a glimpse of red hair in the crowd. The woman it belongs to is short, wearing a silver mask covering the top half of her face. No! My heart races. I must be wrong; she can't be here.

I lean over to get a better look. I knew it! Damn it, Jess! I would recognize her anywhere, even with half her face concealed.

She's dancing with a tall male whose entire face is hidden by his mask. He pulls it up, winking at me. It's Ronin. I can't believe my eyes. What are they doing here? How did they find me? I quickly think of something else, keeping my face neutral before Dante sees my reaction.

He's been talking to me. "... you will need to move quickly. As you know it only takes seconds for the K4 to work and we're not using restraints today, just the tranquilizers." My skin buzzes with anticipation, sweat beading down my back.

Dante needs to remove my cuffs for this to work. Will I have time to use my powers on him? I know they've gotten much stronger while I've been here, but am I strong enough to cause him any harm? What will happen if I fail? It doesn't matter; this is my chance.

"Ladies and gentlemen." He stands to address the crowd. "I gather you here tonight to present you with a remarkable gift far greater than your wildest dreams. A promise of unthinkable power and strength; a chance to become more than you have ever dreamed possible. Please welcome my queen, the one you have so patiently been waiting for."

He reaches his hand out to me, and I just stare at it. He glowers at me as someone shouts from the crowd. "She's a little old."

“Where are the girls we were promised?” another voice yells.

Dante turns to the closest guard “What exactly did you tell them?”

“Humans are vile. I knew they couldn’t pass up an opportunity to defile their youth. They’re all expecting under-aged children,” the guard responds.

I’m shocked; sick to my stomach. I can’t believe the number of pedophiles in this room. It makes things much easier knowing I’m not ruining the lives of innocent people. None of these bastards deserve to live.

Dante giggles. He laughs until he’s bent over, holding his stomach. After a few minutes, he finally gets ahold of himself before addressing the crowd. “You imbeciles. You deserve everything coming your way.”

The crowd, realizing they signed up for something much different from what they thought, begins searching for exits in a blind panic.

“What are we doing here?” someone asks.

“I’m leaving! This is bullshit!” someone else yells.

A big burly man steps forward, stupidly standing his ground. “I’m not leaving without my merchandise.”

The crowd is seething as they begin charging the dais. A guard steps forward, slicing the head off the burly man with one swoop of his sword.

Piercing screams fill the room as people scramble in every direction looking for a way out. They have no luck. The doors are locked, and more guards are now standing in front of them for added security.

I frantically search the room for Jess and Ronin, finding them making their way closer to me. I can see Jess trembling from here, her wide eyes lock onto mine as Ronin whispers something in her ear.

Before I know it, they disappear into thin air, leaving nothing behind, not even a cloud of smoke. They simply vanish, along with my only shred of hope.

“Now, now. Calm down everyone,” Dante says. “Things got a little out of control, but you will keep your heads if you simply follow my instructions.”

The noise dies as nervous energy fills the room. “You will thank me when this night is over as you let go of your hesitations and prepare for the blessing awaiting you. The process is quite simple. One by one you will approach the dais. While I place a dissolvable strip on your tongue, my queen will simply touch your throat. That’s all. No need to panic.”

Music resumes as people reach for champagne, hungry for the promise of power, while others remain frozen like deer caught in headlights. I wonder if their drinks are spiked with something or if they’re really this gullible as they slowly start to relax.

Dante clears his throat. Robert steps beside him before removing the cover from the plate, revealing a small rectangular container.

Dante addresses the crowd once again. “If I may have your attention, we will demonstrate the process with my former assistant.” NO, not him.

Robert’s eyes go big. His knees shake as he takes a couple steps back. Guards surround him, grabbing him by the arms, forcing him to kneel in front of me.

One guard is holding a syringe.

“Please,” I beg. “Please not Robert. There are so many others here.”

Robert is so kind and has done so much to help me. I can’t do this to him. The room is filled with terrible people, but Robert is not one of them. He doesn’t deserve this.

“This is what happens when people disobey me. Remember that, Frankie,” Dante says.

With a guard holding a knife to my neck, Dante removes my cuffs. He opens the lid to the small container, removing a thin piece of yellow ribbon. Robert’s eyes get big as Dante instructs him to open his mouth.

He hesitantly parts his lips, revealing the raw fleshy stub, still oozing with fresh crimson. Dante slips the ribbon inside before sitting back with grim satisfaction. Steepling his fingers together, he squeals like a schoolgirl, unable to contain his delight.

Panic floods me as Robert roars, freezing me in place, unable to wrap my hands around his throat.

“Now, Frankie!” Dante yells.

Robert blinks, and when he reopens his eyes, they’re glowing red. Foaming from the mouth, he doubles in size and lunges forward.

The guards try to hold him back, but he easily throws them off. Just when Robert is about to attack me, he turns, leaping toward Dante. The fangs protruding from his mouth rip away a piece of Dante’s throat.

I scream as blood sprays all over me. Soon, I’m surrounded by smoke as Dante traces away, leaving pure chaos behind.

Robert looks at me, and for a moment his eyes soften. He almost looks human again, but then he lunges at me. I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing myself for pain that never comes.

My eyes shoot open when I hear a loud roar. Robert's head is floating in the air, while his body is sprawled out on the ground.

"Nooo!" I scream.

Before I realize what's happening, Ronin materializes before me holding Robert's head. "I love being invisible."

"You killed him!" I scream.

Ronin tosses the head behind him, grabbing my hand. "He was about to kill you. I had no choice."

"He was my friend," I cry, pulling my hand from his grasp. I stand, looking around. "Where's Jess?"

"She's safe. Now give me your hand. We need to leave," Ronin insists.

I search the room for Dante even though I know he traced away like the coward he is. Demons are killing each other; child molesters are frantically running around trying to find their way to safety.

A sense of peace washes over me when I realize each one of these vile bastards will die tonight.

Closing my eyes, I finally grab Ronin's hand. A spinning sensation overcomes me, making me feel like I'm falling. When I open my eyes again, we're outside the

mansion. I immediately fall to my knees, vomiting what's left in my stomach onto the ground.

"Frankie!" I hear Jess yell. She runs toward me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders, both our faces wet with tears as we hold one another.

"I hate to ruin the moment, ladies, but we need to go." Ronin grabs us both, tracing us to Jess' parents' cabin.

With my hair wrapped in a towel, I sit in front of the fireplace wearing Jess' fluffy pink robe. She was hoping a bath would make me feel better. I didn't have the heart to tell her it's going to take more than a bath for me to truly feel anything.

"Here." Jess hands me a cup of hot chocolate, giving me a soft smile. "It even has those gross hard little marshmallows you like so much."

I blow into the mug before taking a sip. My nose tingles like it always does when I want to cry. I don't deserve her kindness. Would she still take care of me if she knew I was a murderer?

She sits in the chair across from me, holding her own cup of hot chocolate. "Frankie."

I can tell she feels helpless. I know she wants to make everything better, but she can't. No one can.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she finally asks.

I shake my head. That's the last thing I want to do. "How'd you guys find me?"

"We assumed you went to Dante, but we didn't know where he was holding you so Ronin couldn't trace us there."

Jess shudders before continuing to speak. “I got some intel on an underground sex-trafficking group from the dark web and found the event being held by the Horde of Shadows. I was surprised at how easy it was to get in. I guess Dante didn’t care who showed up; none of them were leaving.” She gives me a halfhearted smile.

“How did Dante not see you coming?”

“Ronin said Dante’s visions are sporadic; he can only see the future if he focuses on it. Even then, his visions aren’t a sure thing because the future changes every time someone changes their mind. We knew he wouldn’t be focusing on me, so I kept Ronin in the dark while I searched for you.”

I stare at my friend in awe, imagining how scared she must’ve been this whole time. She looks like she hasn’t slept since I left. Guilt consumes me. I think I prefer being numb.

“I need to go for a walk,” I blurt out, the words rushing from my lips as I begin to feel suffocated by my shame.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I shake my head. “I need some time to think. I won’t be gone long.”

I change into clothes that Jess had already packed for me and step outside. The cool air feels good against my skin. I wander down the dirt road, not caring where I end up.

Her parent’s cabin is nestled in the woods close to Canada. It’s quiet here, but my mind is anything but peaceful.

I can’t believe Robert is dead. I know I should be happy he’s no longer suffering, but

I can't get the image of Ronin holding his head out of my mind. Robert was my friend. He deserved so much better.

Everyone around me deserves so much better—my brother, my mate, my friends. They wouldn't have endured any of this if I didn't exist. They'd be better off without me. The weight of that realization presses down on me, leaving me even more hollow and lost than I already was.

Unable to go on any longer, I find a giant boulder and take a seat. Next to me is a wilted flower, calling out to me. Magic immediately comes to my palms, but instead of mending itself back together, the flower wilts away to nothing. Maybe I'm no longer capable of doing good. What if I spent so much time killing, that I lost my ability to heal?

"Hey." Ronin's voice pulls me from my thoughts. Two swords are strapped to his back. "Jess said you wanted to be alone."

"So then leave," I bite out, not meaning to.

He chuckles, sitting next to me on the rock. "Since when do I take orders from you guys?" He brushes his shoulder against mine. It's almost comforting, being close to him. He looks at me like he knows but doesn't judge.

I don't deserve his kindness. I wonder how Ronin can stand sitting next to me knowing I'm the reason his best friend is gone. He'd still be here if I hadn't pushed him away. I want to apologize, but I can't find the words.

"Did you find Dante?" I ask instead, knowing Ronin went back to the Horde of Shadows after tracing us to safety.

"No, but I made sure not one of those pieces of shit got out alive." He tosses me a

sword. “Here. Swinging a sword always seems to help when I feel lost.”

I catch it by the hilt, balancing it in my hands. It feels good to hold a sword again. I get into my stance, pointing the tip at Ronin.

“Good, you remember your form,” he says before lunging forward, his blade slicing through the air with precision. I parry his swing and thrust forward. We go back and forth a few times, but Ronin easily side steps my every attack.

“Quit holding back,” he barks.

“I’m not.” Sweat runs down my neck. “I’m just out of shape.”

Technically it’s not a lie. I’m breathing heavily and my side is aching from swinging the sword. But Ronin is right. I’m holding back. Who knows what will happen if I unleash my feelings? And I refuse to hurt anyone again.

I swing my sword again, but Ronin easily dodges it, not even trying at this point. He’s toying with me, and it’s pissing me off.

He slaps me on the ass with his sword. “So, you’re just weak then? I expected more from you.”

I bare my teeth, throwing my sword down as my fists clench into a ball. “Fuck off, Ronin,” I seethe.

“That’s it, get mad.” He dances around, taunting me as he flips the sword back up to me. I catch it on instinct. “Show me how you really feel, Frances.” He calls me by the name he knows I hate, hoping it will make me lose it.

“Damn it, Ronin! You don’t know what I’m capable of. What I did in there. All I do

is destroy everything around me. I'm the fucking Realm Eater." I surge forward putting my entire weight behind the strike.

Ronin blocks it, rolling his eyes. "Please, you don't think I can handle the Realm Eater?" He pokes me mockingly. Treating me like I've never held a sword before.

The tension coils inside me as I feign to the left, then pivot to the right. I catch him off guard with a quick thrust. He deflects it, but his eyes widen in surprise.

"Finally." Ronin lunges toward me with a big grin on his face.

Swords clatter as we turn into a whirlwind of strikes and blocks. A flood of different emotions surges through my body, but I don't hold back.

We move, swinging our swords until my muscles burn, and I can no longer hold my sword up. Unable to continue, I drop my arm, letting the sword fall to my side. I look at the sky, finally admitting how I feel as a single tear falls down my cheek. "I'm scared."

Ronin sheaths his sword before pulling me into him, his arms wrapping around me. "I know."

He doesn't explain it away or tell me everything is going to be alright. He simply holds me, letting me cry, and I love him for that.

I finally pull away, wiping my eyes with the back of my hands. "We need to save Zarreth and Nate. I can't just sit here while they're..."

"I know." Ronin cuts me off. "We'll leave once you get some rest and a good meal in your belly. I already packed you a bag."

“Thank you,” I mutter, grateful for the friendship and support he’s shown. I don’t deserve it.

Back at the cabin, Jess offers me a melatonin. “So you can get some sleep,” she says, giving me a reassuring smile.

“Thanks,” I mutter as I take it and head to bed.

We spend the next day planning and preparing. To Jess, only a few hours will pass while we’re gone. But, for Ronin and me, it could be days or weeks.

I’m ready to go through hell and back to save my mate and my brother.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

I 'm unsure how much time has passed. Days, weeks? Insects cover my body as rats eat at my rotting flesh. Damp air coats my ragged wings, causing them to mold. It's so dark I can't tell if my eyes are open or shut.

Dreaming of ways to torture Aradon and Dante is the only thing keeping me sane. I imagine the smell of Dante's burnt flesh filling my nose. The bitter taste of copper lingers on my tongue as I rip into Aradon's face with my fangs. I laugh when the smell of his urine permeates the air, cherishing the sound of their screams as I tear them both apart limb by limb.

This is what loops through my mind, over and over. This is what I focus on because the slightest thought of how I failed Frankie tears my fucking soul apart. Everything happening to her is because of me. Because I couldn't fucking protect my own mate.

I never should have left. I should have thrown her over my shoulder and fucked her until I was enough. I should have fucked her until she could think of nothing but me. I should have fucked her until she was carrying my baby.

"FUCK!" I did it again. I have to get her out of my mind. I'm going fucking crazy. Like I would ever bring children into this cruel world. But Frankie would be a wonderful mom. I imagine a little curly-haired girl running around with Frankie's green eyes, and tiny horns like mine. "GODS DAMN IT!"

Focus, Zarreth. Focus on how you're going to kill Dante and Aradon. Do not think about the freckles scattered across Frankie's face, or the way her eyes glow when she

comes on your cock. Damn it! It takes everything in me not to tear my heart from my fucking chest.

I will not lose my mind in this hole. I've been through this once, and I'll do it again.

A light from above pulls me from my thoughts, startling me as something hits me on the head. I instinctively shield my eyes, trying to look up, but the brightness blinds me. I've been basked in darkness for so long, isolated from the world, that the very concept of light feels foreign.

"Let's go, Maggot. Grab the fucking rope. We don't have all day."

I feel around until I find the rope and crawl my way up. Reaching the top, I find myself surrounded by five guards all pointing their swords at my throat.

Two of them grab me under the arms, yanking me from the hole. Before I can attack, they surround me. I snarl, baring my teeth.

Swords slice through my wings, sending pain radiating through my body as heavy boots come crashing down on my face. I struggle to lift my head, but I'm too weak to defend myself.

"Keep him still!" Aradon's voice slices through the chaos.

Something sharp digs into my eyes, pressure building like two grapes being crushed underfoot.

I cough, the taste of blood filling my mouth, but I force out a smirk, gasping through the pain. "Is this the best you can do? I expected more from you."

Aradon leans in, his voice laced with malice. "Don't worry, we're just getting

started.”

With a sickening pop, the world around me goes black as I brace myself for what’s to come next.

Broken and bloody, I kneel on an all too familiar platform. My wings are stretched wide, nailed to the posts standing on both sides, the never-ending cycle repeating. You’d think they’d get more creative after all these years. The pain is unbearable, but I don’t give them the satisfaction of hearing me scream. I spit, chuckling to myself. My vision may be gone now, but Aradon will pay tenfold when I get myself out of here. I’m just biding my time.

“It’s a pity my savage guards took your eyes. I want nothing more than for you to witness what’s about to happen.”

I hear a muffled wail, followed by a thud and a groan.

“Turns out Dante failed to mention his new little toy is the sister of our good friend, Nate, here. He also failed to mention the extent of her powers. Dante has been hiding her from me, but don’t fret, your mate will be mine soon.”

I roar, as grief overtakes me. No! Not Frankie! Not my mate! Anger ignites within, despair clawing at my insides as I realize I failed her. My heart feels like it stops beating, everything inside me dying as I stand helplessly on the platform, my wings nailed to the poles rendering me useless.

I barely register what’s happening below as I twist and jerk, trying to rip my wings free, but I’m too battered and beaten. A wave of fear and frustration surges through me. I can’t let this be it. The thought of Frankie suffering at the hands of Aradon ignites a wild frenzy inside of me. Anger swells, suffocating my thoughts, erasing every last shred of hope until I remember Ronin.

Ronin will protect Frankie with his life, I know it deep in my bones. My brother who has never failed me—the one who stood by my side as kids while our mothers were being brutalized before our eyes, the one who remained steadfast in the dungeons during our captivity. He will do anything to keep Frankie safe.

The ringing in my ears slowly fades, only to be replaced by Nate's cries. I hear grunt after grunt, making my stomach coil, until finally Aradon lets loose a loud moan. "Don't cry, Nathaniel," Aradon whispers. "You handled it better than most."

"Take him to the barn and feed him to the hellhounds," Aradon commands. "Don't worry, Maggot. The hellhounds are coming for you too."

The platform I'm on lowers, and soon I'm dangling in the air, leaving only my wings to support my body weight. I grit my teeth to keep from screaming. My back pops as pain shoots through my shoulders, but there is nothing I can do to lessen the load. I rack my brain trying to find a way out of this, but my thoughts fade into silence as I lose consciousness.

Night and day have come and gone. Other than animals screeching in the distance and the wind whipping my face, it's silent. My wings have not completely severed. I'm covered in sweat and blood. My throat is dry, full of ash and sand.

I regain consciousness long enough to feel insects feeding off my bloody back. They crawl in and out of my orifices. I can feel one moving around deep in my ear. Its buzzing is the only thing keeping me company until I pass out again.

I know today is the day my wings will completely tear away, and I will die. I know this because today the hellhounds have been released. They're jumping, snarling at my feet, waiting for me to fall to the ground.

I will not have the strength to fight them. Their poison will take over my body and I

will become their food. A part of me finds comfort in this. At least I'll never see that fucking cell again.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

“Y ou can open your eyes now, Frankie.” Ronin steadies me on my feet in the Dark Realm.

I bend over, resting my hands on my knees. “I need a minute to get my bearings.” I struggle to breathe as I fight the urge to throw up. The scorching heat is already intolerable. Ash fills my nostrils, burning my throat.

Ronin glances at me, a knowing smile on his face. “Take your time. Tracing to other realms is brutal, even for a passenger,” he says even though he looks completely unfazed.

“You must be used to it,” I cough, putting my head between my legs, fighting the nausea.

“I’ve been traveling to different realms for most my life, so my body has adjusted,” he explains. “It can take days for most demons to recover after using their traveler’s mark. I’m just more badass is all.” He grins devilishly at me, making me want to smack it off his stupid face.

Ronin retrieves a canteen of water from my bag before handing it to me. “Here, this will help.”

The cool water soothes my throat, but I remember Zarreth saying there’s little water here, so I quickly return the canteen to my bag, rationing it for later.

I squint, trying to keep dirt from blowing in my eyes. Large fires roar in the distance. A stream of lava flows over a black cliff not too far from here. The trees are black and none of them have leaves. There are no flowers, shrubs, or greenery of any kind.

“What other realms have you been to?” I ask as Ronin pulls a pickaxe from his bag.

“Just this shithole, the Human Realm, and the Light Realm,” he says nonchalantly as he walks to a large boulder nestled between two dead trees.

He’s been to the Light Realm? It’s so crazy how he acts like that’s no big deal. “What’s the Light Realm like? I imagine it to be the complete opposite of here.”

“It is. The official name is The Realm of Eternal Light. It’s beautiful there. The mountains are made of crystal, and luminescent flowers stretch as far as the eye can see. They have ethereal beings made of pure light, whose colors constantly shift. Tiny spirits flit around like fireflies. It’s truly amazing.” Ronin places his shoulder against a boulder, pushing it aside.

“Wow, that sounds absolutely incredible!” I struggle to wrap my head around the beauty of it. It sounds like something straight out of a dream.

Ronin uses his axe to break through the dirt where the boulder was. “I’ve been hiding weapons in these woods for years. I figured they would come in handy someday.”

Impressed, I say, “You’re prepared for everything, aren’t you?”

He gives me a cocky grin. “I try to be.” He stops digging when his axe hits something metal and pulls a large box from the ground. When he removes the lid, I see knives, swords, axes, and things I don’t even know the names of.

He hands me a sword. I balance it in my hand before taking a few swings. “Nice.” I

return the sword to its sheath before strapping it to my back.

Ronin hides numerous weapons on his body before strapping two swords to his back.

“It will be a while before I can trace again, so I hope those boots are comfortable.” He points to the cute hiking boots I bought last summer with Jess.

Smirking up at him, I reply, “Don’t you worry about my feet, princess. You should focus on the weird looking bird thing coming at you.” I point behind Ronin.

Raising one eyebrow at me, he unsheathes his sword. “Princess, huh?” He spins around, cutting off the creature’s head in one swoop.

“All animals here are dangerous, despite how cute they may look, so please do not approach any,” Ronin says. “Or try to pet them.”

“Obviously.” How dumb does he think I am?

“It may be obvious to some, but how often did we stop training so you could chase ‘fluffy bunnies’ through the woods?” He asks, arching a brow.

Exasperated, I throw my hands up. “That only happened twice.” The third time was a groundhog, but it’s probably best not to point that out.

Ronin rolls his eyes and points north, or maybe east. I honestly don’t know what direction it is. “This way. We should be there in a few hours.” He turns on his heels, heading to a destination I don’t know.

I can’t believe I thought I could survive on my own out here. What was I thinking?

I’m not much for words as we travel. Ronin gave up on small talk an hour ago. I’m

not good company these days.

I press the palm of my hand over my mating mark, trying to soothe the painful longing in my chest. The ache in my heart runs hotter than the piles of burning brush scattered throughout this shithole. I close my eyes, imagining Zarreth's voice.

Ronin's voice snaps me from my thoughts. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"Nope. There's nothing to talk about other than getting Nate and Zarreth back." I can't let my mind wander. It's too dangerous.

"I'm here if you ever change your mind. Believe it or not, it helps to talk."

I shake my head, appreciating the offer, but I can't dwell on what happened. I'm afraid of what I'll feel if I allow myself to open up. Instead, I change the subject to Ronin.

"So, do you have a special someone waiting for you somewhere?" I realize I know little about him even though we've spent a lot of time training together. I guess I was too busy sulking to care about anything other than my broken heart.

"I'm not mated if that's what you're asking. I'm not sure how it works for someone like me. I've never met another gay demon."

I never really thought about how lonely Ronin must be. He's got to be hundreds of years old if he grew up with Zarreth. That's a long time to spend by yourself.

Reaching out, I squeeze his shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I've never thought about how hard it must be for you."

He shrugs it off. “Don’t feel sorry for me. At least not for being gay. I experimented with females, but they didn’t do it for me. Plus, males are so much easier to figure out.” Ronin nods his head in my direction. “You girls are confusing.”

I don’t disagree with him. Females are complicated. “I don’t feel bad for you being gay. It’s just...it must be lonely never being with a male.”

His eyes go wide, brows furrowing. Suddenly, he’s roaring with laughter, clutching his stomach. “That’s why you feel sorry for me? Because you think I’ve never fucked a male? Trust me, Frankie, you don’t have to worry about me in that department.”

I give him a puzzled look. “I just assumed when you said you never met another gay demon.”

“You should know better than anyone that humans and demons can have sex, considering you’re mated.” Ronin stares at me like this should be common knowledge to me.

I shrug. “I thought it was because I’m half demon.”

“Nope. We older demons have far better control over our strength, so it’s possible for us to have sex with humans. The good thing about being gay, is you don’t have to be as careful with males.” He winks, with a smirk on his face. “Their bodies are stronger and can handle more punishment if you get what I’m saying.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Ew. Listening to you talk about sex is just as disgusting as listening to Nate talk about it. You’re too much like a brother to hear that. It’s gross.”

Ronin laughs again, as I change the subject to something safer. “What’s our plan once we get there?”

“There’s a small bar where demons often frequent. Unfortunately, they’ll recognize me, so I need to make myself invisible while you try to find information on Zarreth. We won’t have much time because my powers are weak right now.”

Anxiety washes over me at the thought of going to a demon bar alone. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to open up to me there. I struggle to strike up conversations with strangers in a human bar. “Why would anyone give me information?”

“Because you’re not a threat,” Ronin says matter-of-factly.

“Gee, thanks,” I say, sarcastically. My confidence is soaring.

“The Death Horde doesn’t take females seriously. In fact, most demons believe females are the lesser gender,” he explains. “They will want to impress you, so get them to brag about being in the Death Horde. You might have to dust off your flirting skills, but they’ll talk.”

My palms are sweaty and my heart pounds vigorously in my chest as we near the bar. Ronin warns me to keep my powers a secret. Apparently, my scent will draw a lot of attention, anyway. I’m developing a complex about my remarkable odor.

“Remember, we have ten minutes, tops. You need to get as much information as possible without raising questions. I’m going invisible now. You won’t be able to hear me or see me, but I’ll be by your side the entire time.”

“Piece of cake. I got this,” I mutter, faking confidence as we continue walking in silence. “I could get used to you being quiet, not bossing me around.”

A thump lands between my eyebrows. Ouch! Apparently, I can feel him, I just can’t see or hear him.

Stopping dead in my tracks, I spot the bar. A skull with two giant horns sits above a door that's barely hanging on its hinges. A demon stumbles out, holding his bloody face. "What the fuck are you looking at?" he says as he walks by.

Okay, this is going to be harder than I realized. Steadying my breath, I open the door. The noise immediately dies down. Demons of all kinds turn so they can get a better look at me. So much for being inconspicuous.

I find an empty bar stool and sit, waiting to be served. Conversations resume as everyone returns to their own business. A female demon with red skin and a long thin tail is behind the bar. She nods in my direction. Her forked tongue flicks in and out of her mouth before saying, "Be right with you, sssweetheart."

Goosebumps form over my skin at her reptilian sound. I nod my head, forcing a smile.

I nervously tap my fingers on the bar as I look around, taking in my surroundings. A huge demon with two sets of horns and black wings is the closest to me. He looks my way, hissing when I make eye contact with him. Okay! He won't be any help.

I decide to wait and talk to the bartender when the hairs on my neck stand on end. "It looks human, but it doesn't smell human," a voice behind me says.

I spin around to see two large male demons staring at me. Their horns curl forward, representing a death demon.

One has a shaved head, while the other wears a man-bun. A plethora of sarcastic comments enters my mind, but I keep them to myself.

"I don't know what she is, but I would love to find out," the bald one says.

I clear my throat, praying my voice doesn't shake. "And how do you plan on finding out?" I give them my best sultry look, which is difficult to do with dirt and ash covering my face.

"I'm sure I can come up with something," man-bun says while baldy traces a claw down my arm.

My heavy breathing accompanies an audible swallow. I'm close to hyperventilating, but I try passing it off as interest instead of anxiety. "I figured two gentlemen like you would at least buy me a drink first," I say, biting my lip to keep it from quivering.

Baldy takes the seat to my left, snapping his fingers. "Barkeep, bring us three pints of demon brew."

Man-bun pulls at the end of my braid as he sits on my right. "You have beautiful hair." He smiles, his rotten teeth on full display.

I become even more uneasy now that I'm sandwiched between them. I remind myself Ronin is here and relax a little. "So, I just got into town. Is there anything interesting happening?" Real smooth, Frankie.

Baldy leans in, murmuring in my ear, "We could make something interesting happen." He runs a claw down my arm again, making the hair rise in its wake.

The bartender sets the drinks down in front of us. Thankful for the distraction, I grab mine to stop my hands from trembling.

"Laying it on thick, huh, Sssargoth?" the bartender hisses.

Sargoth must be the bald one. "You know me," he says. "Just eyeing up the fresh meat."

I tremble at the words fresh meat but try to keep my voice steady. “I’d love to get to know you both first. Maybe you can impress me with some crazy stories as we finish these beers.”

“You want to be impressed, huh?” man-bun says. “We could take you to the pits; show you what happened the other night. Have you ever seen wings ripped away from a demon’s body? It’s a sight to see.”

My breath catches in my throat. Did he just say what I think he did?

“He’s probably dead by now.” Baldy raises his drink as the demons clink their glasses together. “Let’s finish these and find somewhere more private,” he suggests, gazing in my direction, unmistakable lust in his eyes.

They continue talking, but I don’t hear them over the loud ringing in my ears. He’s probably dead. Zarreth! They’re talking about Zarreth. No, it can’t be. Please let it be someone else. But I know in my heart it’s him.

Someone is screaming loudly. I cover my ears to make the screaming stop, but it only intensifies. That’s when I realize the screams are coming from me. He’s probably dead. I’m frozen in place, unable to move.

“What the fuck!” I hear a distant smack. “Why the hell did you punch me?”

“I didn’t fucking punch you, asshole.”

A scuffle breaks out. Commotion is happening all around me, but I have no idea what’s going on. Voices come from the far end of a long tunnel as my vision turns black.

I should move away from the two demons fighting inches from me, but I’m stuck.

My feet are frozen to the floor. Suddenly, a hand clenches my wrist, pulling me toward the door.

Ronin materializes from thin air once we're safely outside. "We need to leave, Frankie."

The sobs wracking my chest make it difficult to speak. "Th-they said he was d-d-dead."

Ronin grabs my shoulders, shaking me until he comes into focus. "He's not dead. Trust me. He's the toughest demon I know."

My knees crumble as I fall to the ground. "They said he was d-d-dead."

Ronin gets in my face and yells. "Frankie! Snap out of it! Zarreth needs us."

His voice, sharp and urgent, pulls me from my stupor. I quickly stand, gathering my resolve, as determination flickers to life inside of me.

Ronin grabs my hand as we take off running. "I know where he is. It's not too far from here."

It must be a hundred degrees here, but I can't stop shivering. My entire body is numb, but I just focus on my legs carrying me as fast as they can over the rough terrain.

It feels like hours have gone by. Fuck! I desperately wish Ronin had the strength to trace us, but he's saving it for when we find Zarreth. I focus on my breathing, thankful for all the running Ronin made me do, so I can keep going.

"There he is." Ronin points, coming to a stop.

I look up as the world around me collapses into silence. I stand, frozen, my breath caught in my throat. Shaking my head, I try waking myself from this cruel nightmare.

Zarreth's massive form hangs between two poles. One wing is completely torn from his back. There's nothing but a small amount of flesh connecting his body to his other wing. It won't be long before it rips away, sending him plummeting into the pack of hellhounds below him.

"Zarreth!" I try to run, but Ronin holds me back.

"You can't go over there, Frankie. Those hounds will kill you."

Determination consumes me. I scream, gripping Ronin's arm tightly, sending my power into his body. He holds on with everything he has, trying to stop me from rushing headfirst into the pack of hounds.

"Frankie, stop!" he shouts, desperation lacing his voice.

I can't stop. I won't. Nothing can keep me from my mate. With blind determination and fire coursing through my veins, I send my magic through Ronin like an electrical current until he finally releases me.

I dash toward Zarreth, heart pounding with each step. A roar rips through my throat as I try scaring the hounds away, but they're not about to leave their feast. I can't let him die. I won't. But it's too late.

I'm only a few yards away when Zarreth's wing rips completely free, his body falling to the ground. The hellhounds are instantly on him.

"Noooo," I scream. "Leave him alone!"

I fall to my knees, sobbing. Ronin wraps his arms around me, and I swear I hear him cry too.

“I love you, Zarreth! Please, I need you! Don’t leave me!” My words turn into incoherent noises as I scream at the top of my lungs.

Heat builds in my hands as pins and needles spread from my fingers through my entire body. My vision sharpens as it does when my eyes glow. Little dots dance in my vision. My powers fuel me, igniting my whole body as Ronin curses, pulling away from me.

Before I understand what’s happening, a burst of light erupts from my chest, propelling my body backward, crashing hard onto the ground. The brilliant light vanishes, fading just as quickly as it appeared.

“Frankie, look.” I barely hear Ronin over my screams.

“Frankie!” he yells again as he points toward Zarreth’s body.

Wiping tears from my eyes, I look up. The hellhounds are laying on the ground, blood pouring from their orifices. Some are writhing around as the last of their life-force leaves them, while others are not moving at all.

Mustering the last of my energy, I stumble my way toward Zarreth. “Oh my God! Oh my God!”

I collapse next to his body, frantically checking for a pulse. I barely recognize him. His swollen face looks deformed. His eye sockets are sunken in, covered in dried blood. I hold his head in my hands, begging him to live.

“Wake up! Wake up! Don’t you dare die on me. I love you! I am yours and you are

mine! Wake up!” I beg as I weakly shake Zarreth’s body.

A small groan escapes his lips, and it’s the most wonderful sound I’ve ever heard. Relief floods over me. My vision blurs with tears of joy and desperation as I gently brush my lips over his bruised face. He’s alive. He’s alive.

“Aw, he’s fine, love. Don’t cry. He’s been in much worse shape,” Ronin says.

“Shut up, Ronin! That does not make me feel better.” I gently run my hands over Zarreth’s swollen cheeks. “Come on, Zarreth! Please, I need you! Wake up!”

Ronin puts his hand on my back. “Frankie, we need to get out of here. Aradon will be back.”

“No, I need to heal him first,” I argue.

“Damn it, woman, you are stubborn. Close your eyes.” Ronin wraps one arm around my waist, lifting me off Zarreth.

I’m too weak from using my magic to fight him off. Dizziness washes over me as Ronin traces us to a cave. He steadies me on my feet before releasing me.

I pound my fists into his chest. “You left him there! You son of a bitch. You left him there.”

Ronin easily grabs my arms, holding them down. “Stop hitting me,” he warns. “And calm the fuck down so I can go get your mate.”

“Okay, okay.” I place my hands over my face, sinking to my knees. “Go!” He’s already gone before I finish yelling for him to go.

I wrap my arms around myself, rocking back and forth.

He's okay.

It's okay.

My mate is safe.

Just breathe.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

I t won't be long now. I will die soon. Frankie's beautiful face is all I think of. I imagine her sitting on top of me, looking at me with her big eyes and beautiful smile. Her long dark curls fall over my face. I swear I can even hear her voice.

“Wake up! Wake up! Don't you dare die on me. I love you! I am yours and you are mine! Wake up!” I feel a weight on my chest. A calmness washes over me as something warm and soft brushes over my face. I must be dying. Why else would I feel at peace right now?

“Awe, he's fine, love. Don't cry. He's been in much worse shape,” a familiar voice says. No, I want to hear the other voice again. The one that soothes my soul.

“Shut up, Ronin! That does not make me feel better.” It sounds like Frankie crying. I wish I could comfort her, even if it's not real. Wet drops fall on my face, and I wonder if it's raining, but it doesn't rain in the Dark Realm.

“Come on, Zarreth! Please, I need you! Wake up!” Is this some cruel joke? Is it possible I'm not dead? Why do their voices sound so clear? Aradon said Dante had Frankie so there's no way she's here. Unless...no, I can't get my hopes up. It's a dream. I'm hallucinating.

“Frankie, we need to get out of here. Aradon will be back.”

Is it possible Ronin saved her from Dante? Is it possible they came for me? I try to pull myself out of it. If Frankie really is here, I need to wake up. I need to protect her.

“No, I need to heal him first.” It sounds like she’s crying. Don’t cry for me, Melita .

The last thing I hear is Ronin’s voice. “Damn it, woman, you are stubborn. Close your eyes.”

A few minutes pass, and I don’t hear another word. I realize the silence means the hellhounds are gone as well. Yep, I’m dead. There’s no way they would leave me alive. I knew it was too good to be true.

Not long after coming to the conclusion that I’m trapped in my own personal hell, I feel a slap across my face. “Wake up, brother.” Ronin’s voice is back, sounding more real than last time.

I try saying his name, but nothing happens. Come on, Zarreth. Move your fucking lips. You can do this. I try again. I feel my vocal cords engage as a strange sound leaves my mouth.

“That’s it, come on. Wake up.” He smacks me again. It stings. Wait, I can’t be dead if it stings, right?

“Ronin?” I finally choke out.

“Yeah, it’s me.” A hand rests on my shoulder, and I nearly break at his touch. I can feel him. I can feel everything. I take a moment to assess my body, grateful for every bruise, every broken bone, every open wound. I’m alive. Ronin’s alive.

“Frankie?” I ask, coughing, my throat sore like I swallowed a bucket of nails.

“She’s safe.”

“Where is she?” I brace myself for an answer that could shatter my entire fucking

existence. The image of her being held captive by Dante sends a wave of nausea crashing through me as I wait for Ronin's response.

"I traced her to our old cave. She's very pissed that I tore her away from you. There's no telling what she'll do if she doesn't see you soon. If you're ready, we should leave."

"I'm more than ready." My heart thuds against my ribcage. She's here. She's fucking here. Despite the ache of my battered body, comfort washes over me. I'm about to see my mate.

Ronin wraps his arms underneath mine. "Hold on tight."

A familiar tingling comes over my body. My head spins, as we trace to the cave, but soon I feel the hardness of the dry ground as Ronin lays me back down.

"What the hell, Ronin!" Anticipation races through me at the sound of her voice. Gods, I would give anything to see her right now. I imagine her hands on her hips with that sassy look on her face. My soul longs for her, needing to be near her.

I try sitting up when a small body crashes into mine. I pull her to my chest, breathing her in. My mating mark burns against my skin in a welcoming reminder that she's here. She is safe. She is mine.

"Frankie, we need to assess his injuries," Ronin says.

Frankie growls, pulling away, ready to attack Ronin. Overcome with primal instinct, I pull her back into my chest, growling at him as well.

"I can take a hint." Ronin walks toward the entrance of the cave. "I'll be outside when you need me."

Frankie and I hold each other in silence as she gently brushes her lips over each of my lids where my eyes once were. Tears dripping onto my face as she moves to my nose, cheeks, and mouth. I feel my face starting to heal despite the binding cuffs I'm wearing. She's healing me. I can't believe how powerful she is. Not even Aradon can use his powers on others when they're wearing binding cuffs.

My surroundings slowly come into focus as I open my eyes, taking in Frankie's beautiful face. Her skin is caked in dust, highlighting the tears that previously rolled down her cheeks. My gaze traces the contours of her nose, memorizing every freckle, taking in the soft curve of her lips. I nearly fall apart looking into her big green eyes. Her hair is braided down her back. Did it get longer?

"I love you." It sounds so ridiculous. Love is such a small word compared to the insatiable hunger I feel every time I'm near her. I want to wrap myself around her until she becomes a part of me. The word love barely scratches the surface of the madness I feel for her.

"I love you, too," Frankie whispers in my ear, trailing her tongue down the column of my throat. Her words soothe my soul as her tongue stokes the fire within me.

I grab the sides of her neck, tilting her head up, claiming her lips. She pushes her tongue into my mouth, making my cock hard. Thank gods that still works, even if the rest of me doesn't. Our teeth mash together as we desperately taste one another.

I try sitting up, but quickly fall back. Shit!

"Let me heal you," Frankie whispers as she makes her way down my body, running her tongue and lips over me, stopping everywhere she finds a broken bone or open wound so she can heal me with her magic. I wonder if she knows how incredible she is. I make a vow to remind her every day for the rest of her life.

Frankie grabs my wrist, closing her eyes, she scrunches her brows together as she focuses on sending her magic into the cuff. It only takes a moment before a white light shines beneath her palms, the cuff falling to the ground. “Holy shit!” It fucking worked.

She keeps her eyes closed in concentration as I place my other wrist in her hand. The moment the cuff makes contact with her skin, it falls off.

I close my eyes, relishing the feeling of raw power coursing through me, igniting every nerve, and awaking every primal instinct within.

I zero in on my mate as she exclaims, “It worked! Oh my God, it worked!”

I stand, pulling her with me. Rising on her toes, she slightly parts her lips as I bend down, seizing them with my own. She runs her fingers through my hair, gently tugging it as she bites my lip.

And just like that, I’m completely undone. Her playful nip awakens a darkness inside of me. I can’t wait any longer. I need her.

I lean in, my mouth close to her ear, my voice dropping to a whisper that leaves no room for doubt.

“Strip.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

I 'm suddenly self-conscious, aware of how disgusting I currently am. It's been days since I've showered. I'm covered in sweat, dirt, and blood. My hair is greasy, I haven't shaved since our fight, and I know I stink.

Zarreth sees me hesitate. Leaning against the wall, he crosses his arms over his chest. "Don't make me wait."

I forgot how demanding he can be, his command instantly turning me on, making me forget how gross I am.

I quickly remove my socks and boots, not feeling very sexy, but the outline of his erection encourages me to keep going. I pull my dirty tank top over my head and wiggle my hips, sliding my cargo pants down my legs, along with my underwear. Stepping out of my pants, I stand completely naked in front of him.

His eyes flicker between black and amber. "You're fucking breathtaking," he growls. "Turn around and grab your ankles."

I do as he asks. I feel so vulnerable bent over like this with my ass in the air, face burning with embarrassment.

He takes his time circling me, running his hand over my back, stopping to squeeze my ass cheeks as he slightly pulls them apart. Humiliated, I try clenching them together, but he digs his fingers into my flesh, keeping me in place.

A warning rumbles low in his throat before his palm pulls away, only to quickly bring it down, smacking my ass. “Don’t hide from me. I love seeing you like this. Seeing what’s mine. Seeing what no one else will ever have.”

I feel myself getting wet as he studies me. Why does being exposed to him like this turn me on so much?

He sinks his teeth into my ass cheek, making me yelp. “Stand up.”

I quickly stand, turning around to face him. The fire burning in his eyes startles me. Their intensity makes me feel more exposed than I was a moment ago.

His nostrils flare as he tries maintaining his calm and collected demeanor. “Fuck it,” he says.

Letting go of his control, He grabs me behind my thighs, picking me up and slamming me against the wall. I wrap my legs around him, securing my ankles behind his back.

Gripping both my wrists in one hand, he holds them above my head as he plunges his warm tongue into my mouth. His other hand reaches into his pants, freeing his cock.

“I need you, Melita ,” he says before slamming himself deep inside me. Moving his hand to my neck, he holds me in place, violently bucking his hips. I try moving in sync with him, but he’s fucking me so hard, all I can do is take it.

He’s so deep, my cervix quivers each time he hits the back of it. It stings briefly before my muscles relax around him. Pressure builds within me as he continues pumping in and out. I don’t know how much more I can take as each thrust rips a scream from my throat. “Oh, God!”

Zarreth growls, “There are no gods here, little one, only demons.”

He sinks his teeth into my nipple, ecstasy rippling through me in waves. “Zarreth, I’m coming,” I scream as I come undone.

He moans loudly, coming inside me as we surrender completely to one another while he continues moving his hips. He doesn’t stop until the last wave of pleasure subsides.

Our hearts beat in unison as Zarreth turns us around. Pressing his back to the wall, he slides us to the ground so I’m sitting on his lap. Our kisses slowly becoming less urgent before he says, “You have no idea how much I needed this, Melita . I couldn’t wait a second longer to be inside of you again.”

Ha! I’m pretty sure I feel the same way. “You have no idea how much I needed this.” I argue.

“Neither of you have any idea how much I’m sick of waiting out here while Frankie’s screams act as a mating call to all the fucking creatures around here,” Ronin bellows from outside the cave. “You guys need to hurry the fuck up.”

Zarreth grins. “It won’t kill you to stay out there a little longer.”

Shit! I forgot about Ronin. I crawl off Zarreth’s lap and begin getting dressed as he pulls his pants up.

“I hate clothes,” Zarreth says. “When we get home, I’m burning every piece of clothing you have so you can stay permanently naked.”

Ronin walks in carrying a huge metal container, just as I pull my shirt over my head. “Shit, there’d be a path of dead bodies everywhere she went with as possessive as you

are.”

Zarreth’s eyes narrow as he considers Ronin’s words. “Yeah, you’re right.” He turns to me. “I guess you can wear clothing outside the house,” he teases.

Ronin sets down the container with a heavy thud, the sound of metal clanking together. “While you two were getting reacquainted, I retrieved the weapons we’ve been collecting over the years.”

I remain where I am while Zarreth walks closer to Ronin, pretending to check out the weapons. I suddenly feel a little guilty for hogging Zarreth to myself, realizing they haven’t had any time together since he came to.

I watch quietly as they look at one another. Struggling to hold back their emotions, they finally pull each other into a tight embrace. It’s a hug that conveys an unspoken bond running deeper than words, hinting at a history only they share.

When they pull apart, Ronin quickly wipes his eyes. Looking away he says, “So, should we find a way out of here or what?”

My stomach sinks at the thought of leaving here without Nate. I haven’t had the courage to ask about him yet. Deep down inside, I know he’s gone. There’s a reason he’s not here, and I’m thankful no one has mentioned him yet, letting me keep it together long enough to hatch a plan to get us out of here.

Zarreth runs his hand over the back of my head. Looking at me tenderly as if he can read my mind, he nods.

I swallow down the lump in my throat before saying, “I’m ready to go home.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Zarreth

The three of us sit in a row with our backs against the stone wall. Frankie on one side of me chewing on a beef stick, Ronin on the other flipping a knife in his hands.

Ronin leans forward so he can look around me, directly at Frankie. "I know you're not going to like this, but it's the only way."

I already know what he's going to say, and he's right. It's the only way. He'll have to transport Frankie to the Human Realm, then wait for his powers to return, before coming back to get me.

By the look on her face, Frankie also already knows what Ronin's plan is. "I'm not leaving him, Ronin; you might as well save your breath." There's my feisty girl.

I don't say anything, instead I just sit back and watch, curious to see how Ronin reacts to her.

He huffs. "Shit woman, could you listen for once in your life? Once you're safely tucked away in the Human Realm, Zarreth and I will camp out here until we can trace back. It'll be fine."

Frankie leans forward, glaring at him. "No, it won't be fine," she seethes. "With the time difference, it will take weeks before you guys get back."

He rubs his temples before glancing in my direction. "You know you're going to have your hands full with this one, right? She's the most stubborn female I've ever

met in my entire existence.”

I chuckle. “She certainly is, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

With a smug look on her face, Frankie says, “Don’t act like you don’t love me, Ronin. You’d be bored without me.”

Ronin lets his head fall back against the wall, huffing, “That’s one way of putting it.”

Their banter makes me happier than I expected it to. Life is certainly a lot easier when the two people closest to you get along, even if it’s in a dysfunctional way.

Ronin pushes himself up. We watch him pace for a minute before he stops and looks at me. “Do you remember Macen?”

I laugh. “How could I forget Macen? He was your first crush.” I turn to Frankie. “You should have seen Ronin’s face every time he came around. He couldn’t even form a sentence when Macen would talk to him.”

Ronin sighs. “It didn’t matter, anyway. I’m not exactly his type. He can help us, though. He received a traveler’s mark a few years ago. If I find him, we can all trace to the Human Realm at the same time.”

If Aradon finds out Macen helped us, there’s no telling what will happen to him. “He would be taking a huge risk helping us. Do you think he will?”

“He will,” Ronin insists. “He owes me. Plus, he hates Aradon almost as much as we do.”

Frankie rummages through the weapons while we talk before holding up some throwing knives. “I like the sword you gave me earlier, but can I bring some of

these?”

We both look at her like she’s crazy. Ronin pinches the bridge of his nose as he says, “Oh gods, not again?” At the same time, I say. “You’re not going anywhere. We’re both staying here, we can’t take a chance of Aradon spotting you out there.”

I feel Ronin holding his breath, just as I am, hoping my stubborn mate will listen without arguing for once. “Okay,” she says.

The look of disbelief that crosses Ronin’s face makes me chuckle. I guess he didn’t expect her to agree so easily.

We divvy up the weapons, leaving some here in case we’re discovered. Just before Ronin heads out, he turns to Frankie. “Try to stay out of trouble.”

She ignores his comment and runs over to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Be safe and come back in one piece. I’m actually starting to like you.”

He pats her on the back. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

He then turns to me as I pull him into a quick embrace. “Noctar, Zhul !” I say, watching as he nods, repeating the words back to me. Our old battle cry hangs between us, a reminder to face whatever comes our way with courage. No fear, just fight.

He disappears, leaving us in a cloud of smoke. Sitting next to the container of weapons, Frankie looks up at me with curiosity in her eyes. “What does Noctar Zhul mean?”

I crouch down next to her, going through the various weapons. “It’s what the Recreants would say before going into battle. It translates to something like ‘no fear,

just fight' in English.”

“Nate and I used to have a mantra we would say to one another when things got hard,” she says, her voice heavy with sorrow. “Stronger than our struggles.”

Frankie hangs her head between her legs, a whimper escaping her lips before she looks back up at me. “My brother?” Her glassy eyes beg me to tell her Nate is still alive.

I can’t find the words to tell her he’s dead, so I simply shake my head, pulling her to my chest.

She releases a sorrowful wail, tearing my fucking heart out. She weeps against my chest, her body violently shaking.

“I failed him. He protected me his entire life, and I failed him,” she says between sobs. “He didn’t deserve this.”

I pull her close, pressing my cheek against the top of her head, as I run my hands over her back. “I’m so sorry, baby,” I whisper, my heart heavy with the weight of her pain. I’d do anything to take away her suffering.

“It hurts, Zarreth,” she cries as her breathing becomes short and choppy. “I can feel my heart actually breaking.”

“I got you, baby.” I say softly, gazing into her eyes as I cradle the back of her neck. “Breathe with me.” I count as I inhale deeply and exhale slowly. Her breath mimics mine until it returns to normal.

I’m not sure how much time passes before she looks up at me once more. “Did he suffer?”

Fuck! I told her I'd never lie to her again, but she doesn't need to hear this. I take a deep breath searching for the right words. "He was really fucking brave, Melita ," I finally say.

Understanding what was left unsaid, her tears turn into a fierce glare, grief turning into rage. Her green eyes transform into a dark night sky as they morph into the blackest of black.

"I want to kill something. I want to make something hurt the way I do. I don't care what it is. I want to destroy something or someone." She pauses for a minute before quietly adding, "Maybe I am the Realm Eater."

"You're not the Realm Eater." And if she is, I'll help her destroy every fucking realm in existence. I'll stand by her side as we ignite the stars, watching each one burn. For her, I'll become a nightmare leaving nothing but ruin in my wake as we revel in the screams of those who challenge us. But she's not the Realm Eater. Even if the prophecy is true, she has too much good inside her.

Frankie tilts her head, blinking her eyes a few times. The darkness fades away as her expression softens. "I think there's something wrong with me."

"You're exactly the way you're supposed to be, Frankie."

Her crying turns into small hiccups. We hold each other in silence until her breathing steadies and she eventually falls asleep.

I stay with her in my arms until her stomach begins growling. I gently pull away and walk over to her bag.

Looking through it, I find trail mix and a beef stick. She needs more than this, especially if we're here longer than one night.

I don't want to leave her, even for a few minutes, but she needs food. I step outside, scanning the woods until I see a creature with a bull's head and a pig's body. It's not too far away, so I won't be gone long. I close my eyes, picturing myself standing behind the animal. A familiar tingling sensation creeps over my skin.

When I open my eyes, I'm exactly where I want to be. I don't waste any time. I snap the creature's neck and trace back to the cave.

I make a quick fire using my powers and begin roasting the bull-pig over the open flame. I go back to holding Frankie while I wait for the meat to cook. I can't get close enough to her. I missed her so fucking much.

"Mmm. Something smells amazing." Frankie cuddles closer to me. Her eyes are still closed, but a smile spreads across her face. "Wait, is that food?"

Right on cue, her stomach growls again. She pushes herself up and sleepily looks around the cave. She's so fucking cute.

"I figured you'd be hungry. I wish I had coffee for you but that's a little harder to come by here."

"Nate used to make me coffee every morning," Frankie says softly.

"I know."

"You do?" She sounds surprised.

Smiling, I remember Nate's warning. "Your brother advised me not to approach you before you've had at least one cup of coffee in the morning."

"I miss him so much. I can't believe he's gone." Frankie rubs her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I wish I got to know him outside of this shithole.” I would give anything to ease her pain, but even time won’t erase it completely. Nate was her only family.

Frankie eats while I go through the weapons Ronin left here. “Did Ronin teach you how to use a sword?”

“We started training with swords and knives before I went to Dante.” Frankie rips off a piece of meat, continuing to talk with her mouth full. “I’m not very good with a sword, but I love throwing knives.”

“I can’t wait to train with you once we’re home.” I’m thankful for everything Ronin has taught her, but I’ll take over her training when we get back.

“You might regret saying that. I’m fairly positive Ronin left each training session with a migraine. He says I’m too stubborn.”

I wink. “That’s only because he can’t spank you like I can.”

Frankie’s cheeks turn pink as she looks at me with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

“I’m not sure how much training we’ll accomplish if you threaten to spank me. I have a feeling I’ll need a lot of discipline.”

“I’ll discipline you any time you want, baby.”

I begin prowling toward her when snarling comes from outside the cave. Mother fucker! “Frankie, stay back,” I order as I pick up a sword, darting toward the entrance.

Fifty hellhounds are running straight toward us. I’ve never seen them run in packs

this large before. Where the fuck did they come from?

I shoot flames at them, but we're severely outnumbered. Swinging my sword, I slice the heads off any who get too close.

From the corner of my eye, I see Frankie holding her hands out with her eyes squeezed shut. She's trying to use her powers, but nothing is happening. "Frankie, get the fuck back," I yell.

"What, and let you have all the fun?" She grabs a sword and crouches into a fighting position.

I keep yielding my sword as the hellhounds continue swarming us. "You just admitted you're not good with a sword."

"I only said that because I didn't want to show you up." Frankie swings her sword at a hound. Its head rolls off its shoulders as she gives me a sassy look, raising one eyebrow.

"You're so fucking sexy right now."

We finally slaughter the last of the hounds when Ronin appears. "I can't leave you two alone for twenty-four hours without trouble coming your way."

Blood and guts decorate the walls while pieces of hellhound flesh litter the ground. I look over at Frankie, covered in blood and dirt. She's not wearing her boots; her little pink toenails almost look comical compared to our surroundings.

Surprised he's back so soon, I ask. "Did you find him?"

A mischievous grin crosses his face as he says, "I sure did."

Before I have time to process the underlying meaning to his tone, we hear growling and swords clashing from outside the cave. “Sounds like he just arrived,” Ronin says casually.

Frankie readies her sword. “I knew that was too easy.”

More hellhounds enter the cave, surrounding us. The three of us stand with our backs together, slaughtering every hound who comes our way.

I’m about to burn them to the ground when Dante appears before us.

“I must say I truly hate this place. Be a dear, Frankie, and come with me so we can leave this filth behind.” He wipes his hands on his shirt with disgust.

“Stay the fuck away from her,” I warn.

Frankie steps behind me while Ronin deals with the hounds still crowding in. I thought she was scared, but when she places her burning hands on my back, I realize she’s pushing her power into me.

My body tingles with the overabundance of energy coursing through my veins. My mate is so fucking brilliant.

I keep Dante talking, giving us time to build our power. We only have one shot, so it needs to be perfect. “Do you honestly think Aradon will let you get away with this?” I ask.

“He doesn’t scare me. Do you know what happens when a demon of my stature takes K4 after being bit by a shifter?” Dante looks at his claws like he’s unimpressed. “Unlike the human shifters, I have complete and total control over my body. There is no one like me. I cannot be defeated.”

Fuck! Can a demon shifter even be killed? Only one way to find out.

Frankie removes her hands, stepping back as I gather the last bit of power in my palms. Suddenly, a knife soars by my shoulder, followed by another.

The matching blades bury themselves deep in Dante's chest. Frankie is fucking fearless.

Dante looks down in shock. I use that moment to push my powers into him, watching his entire body go up in flames. Ronin swings at his head but misses as he shifts into a hellhound.

He's huge. His fur looks like melted tar, parts of him still on fire. I swear his canine mouth smiles at me before turning on Ronin.

Ronin backs out of the cave with his sword up, ready to strike. I swing my sword at Dante, but he's faster than anything I have been up against. Leaping over Ronin's head, he bears his venomous fangs at us.

"Stay inside, Frankie," I yell over my shoulder as Ronin and I team up against Dante. Two Recreants help us surround him, but the four of us are no match for the massive demon shifter before us.

"Zarreth!" Frankie screams. I turn, rushing back to the cave.

I let loose a predatory roar when I see a demon looming over her with a sword to her neck. I leap on the demon before tearing off his head. My mate is the last thing he sees before he dies

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

I watch life slip through the demon's eyes as Zarreth gathers me in his arms. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head. "What are we going to do? We can't let Dante win."

"I know, baby." Zarreth removes something from his pocket. "This may be our only hope. We're better off dead than being captured again."

I reach for the small white container when a hellhound attacks him from behind. "Zarreth!" I scream.

The K4 flies from his hands, skidding across the ground as he falls. Zarreth fights the hound off while I chase the K4, trying to grab it before it tumbles into a small, tight space. No!

I sink to my knees, reaching my hand into the dark crevice. Shit! I can't reach it. I know if I lay on my stomach, I can shimmy my way through, but fear takes over. You can do this, Frankie.

I close my eyes, taking shallow breaths as I work my way into the tight space. My throat tightens, but I fight through the panic. I hear a roar, followed by silence. Praying Zarreth won the fight with the hellhound, I feel around until I finally get the tips of my fingers on the container.

As I back out of the tunnel, a sharp pain rips through my skull as darkness spreads

through my body. Coherent thoughts escape me. I feel like I'm in a fog. What's happening to me?

"I'm so proud of you, Melita !" Zarreth leaps over the hound, landing in front of me.

I drop the K4, wrapping my hands around Zarreth's neck. My palms tingle as power courses through them. His expression turns from joy to shock as blood pours from his eyes.

"No! No! Why am I doing this?" Panicking, I grit my teeth, desperately fighting against my power, but I can't stop it from pouring out of me. "What's happening? Please make me stop! Zarreth, please fight me. Make me stop!"

"Isn't this a sight to behold?" A giant demon enters the cave. His eerie laugh sends a chill up my spine. "I feel like Lucifer, himself, having this much control in my hands."

Zarreth steps on the K4, blocking it from the demon's sight. "Leave her be, Aradon," Zarreth coughs out while I squeeze his throat. "Take me instead."

I finally let go of Zarreth, but when I try moving away, I'm frozen in place. Aradon gives me an evil smile, and it finally clicks.

I'm under his control.

"Oh, Zarreth. Why would I want a lowly maggot when I can have the Realm Eater?" Aradon turns to look at me. "With you by my side, I will be unstoppable."

"Stop this! I'll do anything you ask," I plead.

Hellhounds gather around him, snarling and snapping their fangs, waiting for his

command to attack.

“I know you will, Frankie. I just want to have some fun first.” Aradon nods at the blade. “Now grab that knife, and stab Zarreth in his ribs.”

“No! I won’t do it,” I yell as I step toward the knife, picking it up. “Please stop! You don’t have to do this. I’ll cooperate.” I’m still begging Aradon to stop when I reach Zarreth.

“It’s okay baby.” Zarreth gently caresses my face as he bends down, brushing his lips against mine. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been stabbed. I’ll be okay.” He tries to reassure me with a bittersweet smile.

Gritting my teeth, I fight against Aradon’s control, my head throbbing in pain. I watch in terror, bringing the blade closer to Zarreth’s side, choking on every sob as panic claws at my throat. I desperately try stopping myself, but it’s no use.

My vision blurs as tears stream down my face, mixing with the snot dripping from my nose. I try telling myself it’s just a nightmare as I sink the blade into Zarreth’s flesh.

I feel the resistance of muscle giving way as the blade hits a bone. Slick with blood, my hands slip away from the knife, leaving the blade stuck in his rib.

This can’t be happening. This can’t be real.

Zarreth sinks to the ground, holding his stomach.

“I’m s-so s-sorry,” I sob incoherently as I grip the knife with both hands pulling it free only to stab him twice more.

My fingers open, releasing the knife, but relief is only temporary as Aradon forces me to place my hands on Zarreth's cheeks, pushing darkness into him. Blood pours from his eyes and nose.

Zarreth rests his forehead on mine. "I love you, Frankie. I'm sorry I failed you," he whispers through labored breaths before shoving a yellow strip into my mouth.

The strip dissolves but I barely notice it. I'm too focused on Zarreth's eyes as they roll to the back of his head, his body going limp. Blood drips down my wrists until his head slips out of my grasp. I try catching him, but my arms won't move.

His head bounces off the ground.

"No!" My ears ring loudly, drowning out my own sobs.

I use every fiber of my being to touch Zarreth, to hold him in my arms, bringing life back to his body, but Aradon's hold on me is too strong. My throat feels like I swallowed shards of glass as each sob tears through me, my soul screaming for him to live.

I want to rip my fucking heart out and lie down next to him as my blood soaks into the ground, mixing with his. I want to die in his arms never to feel again.

But instead, my body radiates with an energy I've never felt before as the K4 enters my bloodstream. I try to fight it, but it's useless. Power surges through my veins as something awakens inside me. Something that has been dormant for far too long.

Agony rips through my body as my muscles tighten, becoming stronger. My mouth stretches to accommodate sharp fangs as my fingernails twist into razor-sharp claws. The emptiness within twists into something darker, something hotter until fury ignites inside of me. My sobs turn into a battle cry as I do my best to push Aradon from my

mind.

I am stronger than my struggles.

“Noctar Zhul,” I scream, feeling his powers slither away, leaving only fury in its wake. I slowly rise, turning my head to face Aradon. His eyes widen in fear when he discovers he can no longer control me.

“What did you do, you stupid cunt?” he yells, walking backwards to escape me.

I stalk toward him, reveling in his fear. “Don’t worry about what I did. Worry about what I’m about to do.” I scream as a burst of white light leaves my body, killing every hellhound in the cave.

Blood pours from Aradon’s eyes and nose, his mouth trembling as he drops to his knees. With his forehead pressed to the ground he whispers, “ Desfara .”

I want to slide my sword down his fucking throat, holding him in place while I slowly peel his skin from his flesh, little by little. But I need to get to Zarreth, and this worthless piece of shit doesn’t deserve to take another breath.

I raise my sword before slicing through Aradon’s neck, watching his head roll toward Zarreth’s body. Blood rains around us before Aradon’s body bursts into flames.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:37 am

Frankie

I frantically run to Zarreth. “Come on baby, please!” I cry as I shake his limp body. “Don’t fucking leave me. You promised you wouldn’t leave me again.”

I summon every ounce of power I have, pushing it into him, but he doesn’t move. “Damn it! Come on, Zarreth. I fucking need you. I am yours and you are mine.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I grit my teeth, pushing with everything I have in me while praying to every god I know.

“I won’t do this life without you.” I bang on his chest with balled up fists as tears fall from my eyes. “Get up!”

I strip us both down, lying on top of him, making as much skin on skin contact as possible, hoping a kernel of power hidden somewhere in my body will heal him. But I have none left to give, so I pour every ounce of my love into him.

Something tries pulling me from Zarreth, but I hold on with all the strength I have. “Frankie?”

“Get the fuck away!” I yell. I know Ronin isn’t a threat, but I won’t let anyone near Zarreth.

I close my eyes, laying my head on his chest, breathing in the scent of burning cedar.

This is all my fault. If I hadn’t been so stubborn, Zarreth never would have come

here. He has sacrificed so much for his people, his family. Me. He is dead because of me, and I can't even bring him back.

Anguish churns inside me like a dagger to my heart. My soul screams with a relentless ache, reminding me I have no reason to live. I cycle through the options of how I will end my life if he doesn't come back to me when I feel his hands run through my hair. His warm lips press against my head.

Everything in me comes back to life.

"Zarreth!" I cry as I look at his beautiful amber eyes. He's alive. He came back for me.

"Never think about killing yourself again," Zarreth seethes. "Do you hear me?"

Tears fall down my face as I nod.

He sits us up and cups my cheeks, looking deep into my eyes. "Say it," Zarreth demands as he moves his hands to my shoulders, shaking me.

"I hear you," I mutter.

Zarreth shakes me harder. "Say it," he yells. Why is he being so aggressive?

My teeth clatter as my neck whips back and forth. Zarreth's fingers dig into my flesh, his nails threatening to break skin. "Zarreth, you're hurting me."

He violently shakes me as he repeats, "Say it. Say it. Say it."

"Zarreth, stop it." I hit him in the chest. "What is wrong with you?"

I blink my eyes open as I look around. I must have fallen asleep. The scent of cedar fades away, replaced by the smell of burnt flesh and copper. Bodies are scattered around Zarreth's lifeless body.

He didn't really come back to me.

I look at his bare chest. Time stretches into an agonizing eternity as I watch Zarreth's mating mark gradually fade before my eyes. A wild, primal scream rises in my body as I let loose a sorrowful wail.

"No! This can't be!" I scream. It's gone. His mark is gone. I look at my own chest, watching every last bit of color fade away from the mark. "No!"

My body violently trembles as I push myself up. I feel as though the ground has shifted beneath my feet. Naked, I stumble my way out of the cave covered in blood, holding my chest.

I don't see the soldiers quaking in fear, falling over each other to get away as I walk toward them. I don't even see Ronin as he lightly treads toward me, careful not to startle me.

The last bit of humanity has already left my soul, leaving nothing but darkness in its wake. I can feel hatred taking over. I want to kill everything around me, burn it all to the fucking ground.

"When light fades and shadows play, the Realm Eater comes to take you away," I sing, drifting deeper into the murky depths of my mind, my voice a haunting whisper.

"Frankie," Ronin says cautiously.

I stop walking and slowly tilt my head as I focus on his blue eyes. Vast oceans filled

with grief stare back at me.

“Frankie, put the knife down,” Ronin pleads.

I hear his words, but they have no effect on me. Instead of doing what he asks, I sing the second verse of the fucked-up nursery rhyme. “Step softly, dear wanderers, for I’m watching you all, and I’ll feast on the brave ones who answer my call.”

“Where’d you hear that?” he asks, stepping forward and reaching for the knife. I bare my fangs at him and growl, making him stop in his tracks.

Warm, sticky liquid trickles between my fingers. Satisfaction sweeps through me as I watch my blood drip to the ground.

Instead of repositioning the knife so I can hold it by the handle, I grip the blade tighter. The pain doesn’t register. I need more. I squeeze even harder, pressing the sharp steel deeper into my flesh.

Darkness bubbles from deep within my soul. My power returns tenfold as dark, oily magic spreads throughout my veins.

“Why do I get to live when the two people I love the most died protecting me? Why do you get to live while your best friend lies dead not far from us?” I focus my gaze on the crowd of soldiers surrounding us, raising my voice. “Why should any of you live when there is nothing worth living for?”

I close my eyes, tilting my head to the sky, as a scream erupts from deep within my chest, raw and untamed. It drowns out the screams of those around me. For the first time, I embrace the darkness within.

I will kill them all.

I barely register the hands firmly gripping my upper arms. Ronin is screaming something at me, but I can't hear him. It sounds like he's standing at the other end of a long, narrow tunnel.

I shake my head, confused, forcing my eyes to open. I finally snap out of my trance, looking around.

Demons with blood-stained tears on their cheeks are holding their heads in agony. I know I should stop the darkness that's pouring from me, but I can't. I'm not even sure I want to. I imagine everyone laying in a pool of their own blood as a sense of peace washes over me.

"Frankie, this isn't you," Ronin pleads as blood drips into his mouth from his nose. "Zarreth wouldn't want this for you. This is not the person he fell in love with."

Confused, I turn toward him. "The person he fell in love with is dead."

Ronin grabs my face, turning it toward a demon convulsing on the ground. Another demon is crawling toward him with his arm outstretched. I watch his body completely collapse to the ground.

"Look at what you're doing. You're better than this. You're better than Aradon or Dante. Don't be like them," Ronin begs.

As my cloudy brain tries to process what he's saying, a sharp pain stabs through my heart. My claws morph into normal fingernails while my fangs shorten into human teeth. I feel the darkness leave my body as I fall to my knees. The crowd collectively cries in relief.

I look at my chest, watching the faintest outline of tattered wings slowly return to my skin. Zarreth!

I scramble to my feet and run back into the cave. He's in the exact same position I left him in, but I can see the outline of his mating mark.

An invisible thread from my heart to his weakly pulls me toward him. Our bond! I can feel it.

The smell of sulfur fades, replaced by the scent of lavender mixed with cedar as the last of the darkness leaves my body. I drop to my knees, tentatively touching his mark. He's warm.

Flooded with relief, I collapse to his chest as a bright white light shines between our entwined bodies. A light so pure it feels like it's seeping into my soul. Soon the entire cave is glowing, the air thick with electric charge.

I feel his breath against my ear before I hear my name. "Frankie."

He's alive.

His eyes search for mine with an intensity that makes my heart ache. The moment our gazes lock, I unravel.

"Oh my God." Placing a trembling hand on his cheek, I hold my breath, afraid to get my hopes up. Afraid of what I will become if this is another cruel dream. "Is this real?"

His fingers cup my face, his touch igniting every nerve ending in my body. Crashing his lips into mine, he turns us on our sides so we're still facing one another. "It feels real to me."

I clutch him tightly, my fingers desperately digging into his skin, trying to anchor myself to him in case this is merely a figment of my imagination. His muscles bulge

under my hands as he moves to wipe away my tears, his touch warm against my skin.

Neither of us breathe a word as we bask in the comfort of the white light surrounding us. Maybe this reality only lives inside the warmth of this light. If we don't move, maybe we can stay this way forever, embraced in each other's arms.

The light begins to fade, the edges of our world blurring. No!

"Don't leave." I panic. "Please don't leave me, Zarreth." I beg, praying this won't end.

His eyes soften as he places his forehead to mine, our breath mingling in the small space between us. "I'll never leave you, Melita."

I whimper at his words, but still close my eyes, shutting out the fading light. I can't bear the thought of losing him again.

"Frankie," his voice calls to me, steady and soothing. "Open your eyes."

I slowly lift my eyelids, bracing myself for the emptiness I so dread. The beautiful light is gone, but my mate remains. "You're still here," I breathe, my voice thick with emotion.

"I'll always be here. We're bound. Nothing can change that, not light nor darkness. I am yours and you are mine."

I haven't been able to look Zarreth in the eye since we arrived in the Human Realm last night.

Even though the K4 left my body, Ronin's voice constantly repeats in my head, reminding me of the monster I've become. This is not the person he fell in love with.

When we got home, I went straight to my bedroom and didn't come out. Zarreth was the only one I allowed in.

I know Jess is worried sick about me, but how can I face her? My fearless best friend who infiltrated a demon gathering to save me. She risked her life for me, while I took lives from others. I don't deserve her kindness. I don't deserve anyone's kindness.

I don't know why the K4 was only temporary for me, but I'm grateful it's out of my system. Apparently when I took it, the hellhounds inside the cave were not the only ones to die. All the hellhounds and a handful of demons standing next to the cave also died. Unfortunately, Dante traced away before my powers reached him.

Zarreth and Ronin tried convincing me that what I did was because of the K4, but I know better. I recognized the darkness within me like an old friend. It wasn't the K4 that made me lose control. It was me, the Realm Eater.

Zarreth pulls me closer to him so there's no space between my back and his chest. "Stop doing that."

I roll toward him as the sheets wrap around my waist. "Doing what?"

"Thinking."

I huff. If only it were that easy. He grabs my chin, lifting my face toward his. I keep my eyes low. "Look at me, Frankie."

When I finally look into his amber eyes, I see nothing but love and admiration.

Zarreth uses his thumb to wipe a tear away. "You are not evil. You saved me and so many others last night. You killed Aradon. Think of all the demons who owe you their lives because of that."

I want to argue with him, tell him that no one owes me anything. I want to tell him he's wrong, that he should stay away from me, but I'm too selfish. Instead, I pretend everything is alright. "Is that bacon?"

Zarreth nods, wiping another tear from my face. "And coffee. Ronin and Jess are making breakfast."

I crawl out of bed before pulling on a pair of shorts and one of Zarreth's t-shirts.

He looks at Ms. Kitty, who's curled up by his feet. "I could possibly compete with bacon, but I don't stand a chance against coffee." Getting out of bed, he pulls on a pair of sweatpants before coming toward me.

"Come here, little one." Zarreth bends down, helping me onto his back so he can give me a piggyback ride to the kitchen.

Taking a deep breath, I slide an invisible mask over my face, smiling as we come around the corner.

Jess is sitting on the counter watching Ronin make scrambled eggs. Her body jerks when she sees me, like she's going to jump down and run over to me, but she stays seated. I know it kills her not to coddle me, but I appreciate everyone feigning normalcy right now.

I hop off Zarreth's back, making my way to the coffee pot. "Where's Macen?"

Poor Macen didn't know what to think of me. I'm sure he would love to see my head on a stick after what I did to his horde, but he helped us anyway. He didn't say much to me, but he wasn't rude either.

I will forever be in his debt, and I will always be grateful for what he did.

“He was gone when I woke up,” Jess says. “Apparently I’m not his type.”

I roll my eyes. “You work fast. How do you know you’re not his type?” This feels good. I can do this. I can have normal conversations. I will not fall apart.

“Apparently he likes the burlier type, packing twelve inches.” Jess uses both her hands to show us just how long twelve inches is.

I look over at Ronin and we make eye contact. He gives me a big smile and winks at me.

Zarreth walks over to Ronin, patting him on the back. “Look at you bagging your childhood crush.”

“Ha!” Ronin says, dividing the scrambled eggs between four plates. “Maybe one day,” he says before asking me to grab the forks.

I’m thankful for the simple, ordinary task until I spot Grandpa G sitting on the counter above the silverware drawer.

I extend my hand to touch the wilted leaves but stop halfway. I chew on the inside of my lip before swallowing nervously. Can I revive Grandpa G, or will I kill him like everything else in my life?

Closing my eyes, I remember my grandpa bouncing four-year-old me up and down on his knee. I gently touch the plant, pouring as much love as I can muster into it.

I open my eyes and hold back a silent sob as a tear rolls down my cheek.

Grandpa G perks up. Another tear escapes as his leaves turn green. I feel a little lighter as the smallest weight lifts from my shoulders. It’s not a lot, but it’s

something.

Maybe there's hope for me yet.

Maybe.

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The beast slams into the cage. It stands on its hind legs, shaking the metal bars back and forth. Saliva drips off its fangs as it growls loudly.

His collar beeps as electricity shoots through his body, sending him backwards through the air. His body hits the ground as he convulses.

“When will you ever learn? I saved you, my friend. There is no reason for you to kill me. Not that you would succeed if you tried. You’re lucky I found you when I did. Those hellhounds did quite the number on you.”

The beast shifts from a hellhound to a thin, naked man. His body trembles violently. Quiet sobs and chattering teeth echo off the walls.

“And here you are, repaying my kindness by trying to end my life. It’s your sister’s death you should be planning. She’s the one who left you rotting in Aradon’s dungeon while she saved her little boyfriend instead.

“No bother. You’ll worship me soon enough.” Dante exits the dungeon, dragging his cane over the metal bars.

The End