



# Can't Bite This Feeling (Monster Between the Sheets: Screaming Woods #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He sold his soul to bring her back—now she has to save what's left of it.

Rapha

I sold my soul to Lucifer for one reason.

Drusilla.

She was everything—beautiful, bold, untouchable. And mine. Until the night her father tore her from me and called it justice.

I've spent centuries becoming something dark enough to bring her back. Now, I'm not only a vampire. I'm a demon of greed, a soul-trader bound to Lucifer himself. Power is second nature. Souls are currency. And nothing is enough—except her.

But the woman I resurrect in Screaming Woods isn't the same girl I lost. And I'm no longer the man she loved. She looks at me like I'm a monster. Maybe I am.

And when the past claws its way out of the grave, I have to choose: protect my power—or fight like hell to protect her.

I brought her back from death.

But if I can't outrun the monster I've become, I'll lose her all over again

Total Pages (Source): 18

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Rapha

The first time I see her, she's barefoot in her father's garden, crushing lavender beneath her toes like she's never been told not to ruin something beautiful.

I'm perched in the olive tree above her, hidden in the dark. Not stalking. Not exactly. Just... watching. The way a starving man might watch a feast he has no right to touch.

She hums as she walks, head tipped to the moonlight, lips curved in a smile meant for the stars. A girl with secrets. A girl with fire.

Drusilla.

General Cassian's daughter.

Off-limits in every possible way.

She's supposed to be meek. Quiet. Invisible. Raised to be seen only when summoned, heard only when praised. But there she is, half-wild and wholly radiant, talking to the moon as though it's an old friend and laughing under her breath like she's in on a joke the world hasn't caught up to.

And me? I'm undone.

Centuries of control, of wrapping myself in shadows and silence, fray the moment she steps barefoot onto the path.

The first time we speak, it's because she lures me out like a siren with no song but all the same power. Her voice is low and certain as she steps into the olive grove after dusk, where I'm supposed to be alone.

"You don't cast a shadow when the moon is full," she says, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

I've killed men for less than the challenge in her beautiful brown eyes. But somehow, she sees me. Not with fear. Not with the awe most humans wear when they sense what I am.

She sees me like she's already claimed me.

I go still. Centuries have taught me how to kill before a mortal can scream. But she doesn't scream.

She smiles.

I should run.

Instead, I fall.

She keeps coming back. Every night for a week, then two. Sometimes, she talks. Sometimes, she listens. Sometimes, she sits beside me and says nothing at all, like we're already something sacred.

It's not supposed to mean anything. Not to me. I've had lovers. Fools who thought they could touch eternity and not burn.

But she's different.

She doesn't want eternity. She wants me .

Our first kiss is in the chapel ruins at the edge of the cliffs, where no one goes except ghosts and fools in love. Her hands shake the first time she touches my face. Mine do, too.

I tell her what I am. A vampire. Turned long ago, before the rise of Rome, when gods still bled and shadows had teeth. I wait for the fear.

It never comes.

“Is that all?” she asks. “I thought you were going to tell me you were married.”

I laugh for the first time in forever.

She doesn't want my power. She doesn't crave immortality like so many others who've found me over the years. Her reasons are simpler. More dangerous.

She wants freedom. She wants us . She wants the life her father will never let her have, the one where she isn't a possession traded for alliances or legacy. The one where she can speak loudly, laugh freely, and walk barefoot in the garden without punishment.

“He says my mind is too loud,” she once whispers into my chest. “That if I don't learn silence, he'll teach it to me with a belt and a locked door.”

I remember the way she flinched when a twig snapped. The way she touched her bruises like memories she couldn't scrub away.

And Gods help me, I want to burn the whole Empire down for her.

But turning someone—choosing someone—isn't a decision I make lightly. I've lived long enough to know how wrong it can go. How hollow forever can feel when it's

born from a wound instead of a wish.

So I refuse.

At first.

I tell her no. I tell her to wait. I tell her to forget me.

She doesn't listen.

She cups my face and says, "Let me choose you. Let me burn for something that's mine."

The words brand themselves into my soul.

So I give in.

We don't rush it.

For all her fire and fearlessness, she blushes when she tells me—softly, fiercely—that she's never been with anyone before.

"I wanted it to be you," she says, like it's the most natural truth in the world. "It was always going to be you."

Something in me breaks.

Not with lust, not even with longing, but with love —an aching, impossible thing I never thought I'd feel. Not after everything I've lost. Not after what I've become.

We find a hidden place beneath the cliffs, shielded by rock and twilight and the hush

of the wind. The air smells like salt, dusk, and lavender, the kind she crushes beneath her toes. The kind I will now always associate with her skin.

I lay my cloak over the moss like an offering, smoothing it with trembling hands. I do not shake from hunger, though I ache with need. I shake from awe. Because she's here. She's real. And she's mine.

She watches me as I strip off my tunic, her fingers curling into the hem of her dress, her breath coming faster. Fire flares in her eyes, but not fear. She is afraid of nothing. Not even me. Not even this.

"Come here," I whisper, voice rough.

She steps closer. Slips her dress over her head. She stands before me in the dim light, bare as the moon, blushing but unbowed. Her body is all soft curves, flushed skin, and trembling strength. My breath catches in my throat.

"You're shaking," she murmurs.

"So are you."

"I'm not afraid."

"Neither am I," I lie.

She steps into my arms and kisses me like a vow, softly at first, then deeper, urgent, tasting wildness and want. I lift her gently, laying her down on the cloak, brushing moss from her hair. She's laid out like a sacrifice, like something holy. And I am already hers.

"Tell me what to do," she whispers. "I don't want to get it wrong."

“There is no wrong,” I murmur, kneeling between her thighs. “There is only us . Let me show you.”

I kiss my way down her neck, over her collarbone, down the soft slope of her breast. Her nipples are already tight, aching for my mouth. I take one in gently, teasing her with my tongue and teeth. She gasps, arches into me, fingers tangling in my hair.

Her legs shift restlessly beneath me. “Rapha?—”

“I’ll stop if you want,” I say, voice ragged. “Say the word, and I’ll stop.”

She looks at me, eyes wide, pupils blown with desire. “No. I want...I need ...I didn’t know it could feel like this.”

I suck her nipple into my mouth again, tasting her slowly, reverently. Her thighs clamp around my waist, her fingers claw at the moss.

I kiss her flushed cheeks, her parted lips. “Are you ready?” I ask, though every cell in my body is screaming for her.

She nods, tightens her legs around my waist, and pulls me close.

When I finally enter her, I do it slowly.

Carefully. She’s tight and wet and so very warm.

Her channel clenches around my cock with every delicious inch I sink inside her.

I grit my teeth, trying not to lose control, but the feel of her, the sound of her gasps and pants as she whispers my name like a prayer is too much.

“Gods,” I groan. “You’re perfect.”

She whimpers. “Move. Please. I want to feel all of you.”

I rock into her with long, slow strokes, memorizing every sound she makes. She grabs my shoulders, her nails raking down my back. Her eyes lock on mine, dark and dazed, like I’ve cast a spell.

“You feel...Oh, Rapha...”

I lean down, kiss her throat, whisper ancient words in her ear. Words that mean love. And yours. And always.

She tightens around me, cries out, and falls apart.

I bury myself deep inside her, spilling with a groan that echoes through the rocks. My body shudders, heart pounding against hers. I don’t know where she ends and I begin. I don’t want to.

After, we lie tangled together, my hand splayed over her belly, hers cupped over my heart.

“I can feel it,” she says softly.

“What?”

“The way you love me. It’s in my bones now.”

I press my lips to her temple. “You were mine long before this. Before time. Before memory.”



She smiles, soft and wicked. “And now you’re mine.”

She falls asleep like that, with my arms around her, her fingers curled over my heart like a brand. And it is. She is.

Forever.

It happens beneath the cliffs where we first made love, where the wind howls like prophecy and the sea lashes the rocks below, as if the earth is unsure whether to mourn or celebrate what we are about to do.

She lies beneath me, bare and brave, her dark hair a halo of tangled silk around her face, her eyes lit from within. Her fingers trail lightly down my chest, her voice calm even as the air vibrates with the unknown.

“Do it, Rapha. I’m ready.”

“No,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “You don’t understand what you’re asking.”

“I do,” she says fiercely. “I want this. I want you .”

My heart—whatever’s left of it—stutters.

She cups my cheek, pulls me down until our foreheads touch. “Don’t you see?” she whispers. “This isn’t death. This is the first time I get to choose . And I choose you.”

I exhale shakily, my fangs descending as my control frays. My body is tight with restraint, my cock already hard from the nearness of her, the scent of her skin, the truth in her voice.

“You’ll feel everything,” I warn her. “The pleasure. The pain. The hunger.”

Her thighs open, cradling my hips. “Then give it to me. All of it.”

I growl low and possessively, kissing her like I’m drowning. My tongue sweeps into her mouth, my hands clutch her hips as I grind against her, letting her feel the weight of what’s coming. She arches into me, panting, needy.

“Please,” she gasps. “Don’t be gentle.”

“Gods, you don’t know what you’re asking.”

“Yes,” she moans, pulling me tighter. “I do.”

I trail kisses down her neck, my breath hot against her throat. Her pulse beats wildly beneath her skin, so fragile, so sweet. My fangs brush her flesh, and she shudders, her hands clutching my hair.

“Now,” she whispers. “Do it. Make me yours.”

With a groan that’s part agony, part ecstasy, I sink my fangs into her throat as I sink my cock into her body.

Her cry is sharp and sudden, but she doesn’t pull away. Her body tenses, back arching hard as my venom floods her system. Her heartbeat stutters. Her hands seize mine, fingers laced tight.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

She trembles and writhes beneath me, her legs locked around my waist as if anchoring herself to this world. To me.

I drink—not deeply, just enough to taste her, to know her, to mark her.

My fangs are bloody as I pull back, my cock throbbing inside her slick heat.

I slice my wrist with one sharp fang, pressing it to her lips. “Drink, Drusilla. Take all that I am.”

She doesn’t hesitate. She wraps her lips around the wound and drinks —greedily, desperately, reverently. I groan, watching her throat work as she swallows mouthful after mouthful of my blood, binding us in a way no vow ever could.

The change hits her like a storm.

She thrashes beneath me, her body shaking, her nails dragging down my back in wild, instinctive pain. Her eyes widen, her breath catches, and her mouth opens in a silent scream.

“ Shhh, ” I croon, wrapping my arms around her, holding her as the ancient magic burns through her veins. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

I cradle her as she shakes and shudders and finally stills, whispering words in Latin—words older than the Empire, older than light.

Amor. Mea. Aeternum.

Love. Mine. Forever.

The wind quiets. The sea stills.

And then...

Her fingers twitch.

Her lashes flutter.

She blinks once. Twice.

When her eyes open, they're no longer mortal. Still molten brown, still the eyes I love, but the pupils are now ringed with gold.

Drusilla inhales sharply, and her lips curl into a wicked, wonderstruck smile. "Is this what it's like"—her voice is lower, richer, laced with something dark and dazzling—"to be free?"

I don't answer with words. I kiss her like a man who's found his salvation. Like a lover who's been born again in her arms.

I pull out and plunge deep inside her. She moans as she flips me onto my back. Bracing her hands on my chest, she rides me, rolling her hips as she takes me deep. Fuck, she's so beautiful as she comes apart on my cock, dragging me over the edge with her into forever...

We plan to run. We steal coin from her father's study. She hides a pair of boots and a compass beneath the stable floorboards. I gather horses, food, names of safe houses far beyond the border.

One more night, we say. Just one.

But the gods are never kind to men like me.

I feel it before I hear it.

A scream. Not in my ears, but my soul. A tether ripped loose. A bond torn in two.

I drop the saddle I'm lifting. I run faster than I've ever run. My feet barely touch the ground.

By the time I reach the temple, she's gone.

Her body lies crumpled on the gleaming black marble of the altar, gilded by the moonlight spilling through the high, arched opening.

A stake is buried deep in her chest, her mouth frozen in a gasp that will never end.

Blood stains the silk of her robe, blooming like roses across her breast.

I drop to my knees and gather her into my arms.

She's still warm.

I press my forehead to hers and whisper every prayer I've ever known. Every curse. Every bargain I'm willing to make. My tears stain her cheeks. My voice cracks. My body shakes with the weight of what I've lost.

I would give anything— anything —to bring her back.

But the gods are silent.

Gently removing the locket I gave her after we first made love, I pull it over my head—a symbol of our love I will carry always.

I bury her beneath the cliffs where I first kissed her. I mark the grave with stones shaped like stars and place lavender on her tomb.

I walk into the night with vengeance in my heart. Only one person would do this to her.

Cassian.

Her father.

I don't hunt him like a soldier. I hunt him like a wolf.

For days, I track his movements through the city. I watch him parade through the streets like a god in polished armor, accepting praises carved from fear. He thinks her death made him stronger. Made him clean again.

I may be a vampire, but he made me a monster. He doesn't know what I'm capable of, what I'm willing to become to avenge her death.

On the seventh night, I strike.

The villa is silent when I slip through the shadows. His guards are loyal but slow. They don't even have a chance to scream. I leave their blood soaking into the marble. I don't care who sees.

I want him to know it's me.

I find him in his study, where he once beat her for reading scrolls not meant for

women. The room reeks of wine and power and old blood.

He looks up from his desk, utterly calm. “I wondered when you’d come.”

I bare my fangs. “You murdered her.”

“She was mine to discipline.”

“You chained her. Starved her. Beat her.”

“I raised her to be a daughter of Rome . You turned her into a blasphemy .”

My laughter is cold. “She chose me. That’s what you couldn’t stand.”

He stands and draws his sword. “She was my legacy.”

“She was my love ,” I growl, launching myself at him.

Steel meets supernatural speed. His blade slices my skin. I taste blood. He lands a cut across my shoulder, another at my thigh. But I’m stronger. And I’m no longer holding back.

He screams as I break his arm with a snap. I drag him to his knees, fangs bared, heart pounding like war drums.

His eyes burn with hatred. “I should’ve drowned her at birth.”

Those are his last words before I tear out his throat. Not cleanly. I make it hurt . I make it last.

And when he dies, choking on his own blood, I whisper her name into his ear.

Drusilla.

The earth is silent when the blood lust fades. My hands are drenched in blood. My soul is hollow. But my vengeance is complete.

I swear on her blood, her name, her love, that I will find a way to bring her back. Even if it takes centuries. Even if I have to crawl through the fires of the underworld to find the pieces of her soul.

Even if it means becoming the very thing she once saved me from.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Rapha

One day, I'm going to blow this popsicle stand and get a real job.

Looking around at the luxurious, if slightly hellish, waiting room in Glutton Hall, I can't help but wish I'd made different choices in life. Ones that hadn't brought me straight to, well, Hell. In living color. Or rather, undead color, which could totally catch on as a home furnishing palette.

My recently acquired talons tap against the side table, a masterpiece of marble stone masonry that occasionally shifts into a blood-red stone that screams in agony until it becomes marble again.

Like I said, I'm in Hell. Not, oh I hate my hometown and its narrow-minded people Hell, but actual, Lucifer rules us all, souls are tortured, I'm the demon of greed and a reaper of souls Hell.

I look up when a noise distracts me, but it's just Lucifer's personal assistant coming out of his office. I'm here to answer a summons I received two hours ago. Lucifer does like to keep us all waiting. It's part of his schtick.

I retract my talons and sit back in the pressed-foam chair that should be comfortable but isn't.

That's also something Lucifer likes to do—give the appearance of opulence and comfort, then snatch it away.

It's needling, but not quite annoying. Just another layer of the hell Lucifer brings to life daily.

"Excuse me, sir," the assistant says suddenly, his red gaze taking me in with a dismissive glare. How can a glare be so dismissive? I don't know, but the assistant pulls it off. "Lucifer will see you now."

I nod and stand, tugging the jacket of my black tailored suit to ensure it's straight. The suit isn't a necessity, but I thought I should wear it since I'm meeting the Fallen One.

The assistant goes back to typing aggressively on his keyboard, a sound that rattles my nerves.

I'm not the kind to scare easily. I've lived for millennia, once as a man, then as a vampire, but now I'm a demon, I've seen it all.

Every horror and blight people can produce, every form of torture, and some rather inventive betrayal plots.

And Lucifer? He's the king of all that's wrong with the world.

When he summons you, he always has some new, ingenious method of torture in mind. Whether it's aimed at you or someone else doesn't matter. It's the thrill he seeks in his endless, vapid existence. I expect today to be no different.

"Rapha! Thank you for being so patient," Lucifer says as I walk into the grand hall he reserves as his personal playground.

The large room is as richly decorated as usual, although I'm fairly certain one of the paintings of a half-naked female on the wall has come to life.

I'm sure she's pulling grotesque faces at me from the corner of my eye but quickly resumes a benign expression when I glance at her directly.

"Of course, Lucifer. I am yours to command," I say as I approach Lucifer's throne.

Once, I was striking as a mortal and formidable as a vampire. I may appear unchanged except for my crimson eyes and the talons, but with every soul I claim, I sink deeper into the demon I chose to become.

Lucifer lounges on his throne with the effortless confidence of a rock star crossed with a fallen angel.

Today, he wears a tailored midnight-black suit embroidered with gold thread that shimmers like molten coins, each cuff dripping with red silk that pools like fresh blood around his wrists.

Sharp-shouldered and extravagantly cut, the jacket clings to his lean frame as though afraid to be discarded.

His hair is slicked back to gleaming perfection, and a ruby the size of a pigeon's egg glitters at his throat, catching the flicker of hellfire that frames the marble dais.

He is vanity incarnate, and he knows it as he flashes me a grin that could melt wax and gestures for me to come closer.

"You are reaping many a fine soul for me to torture," Lucifer begins before he's distracted by a tray of jellied eyeballs. I've never seen Lucifer eat anything, but there's a first time for everything, I suppose. "How are you liking your demonic powers?"

"They serve a purpose," I reply without emotion before asking the question I've

posed for the last few months since Lucifer transformed me. “When can I expect Drusilla’s return?”

Lucifer tuts, and his eyebrows pull together. “Patience is a virtue, remember, Rapha?” He sits forward on his throne, his all-seeing gaze taking me in. He doesn’t look quite as impressed as he did when I was a vampire. “I’m not certain this role suits you. Do you think I should get Mammon back?”

I know he’s messing with me, goading me, so I inhale softly to calm my churning emotions. He wants me to react with rage so he can bait me further. I won’t give him the pleasure. “If that is what you wish, Master .”

I can’t resist adding a sarcastic drawl to the last word.

I’ve lived a long life, and I had almost as much power as Lucifer when I agreed to take Mammon’s place as the demon of greed—almost, but not quite.

Not enough to achieve the one thing I’ve craved for centuries.

My agreement with Lucifer means the resurrection of the only woman I’ve ever loved after centuries of emptiness without her.

A knot that’s lived in my chest since the day I lost Drusilla tightens a little more as the memory of her taste, her scent, her beautiful, sweet voice comes back to me.

Drusilla.

She’s the only reason I agreed to become the demon of greed. I’ve waited so long, but every minute now seems like a lifetime.

“You’re so serious, Rapha.” Lucifer pouts almost prettily, his eyes cutting to me as

his bottom lip pokes out. “Mammon was so much more fun to play with.”

I want to tell him to pull his bottom lip over his head and smother himself with it, but I hold my tongue. I lower my gaze, feigning an air of deference, but it’s not something I’m good at. Not after several lifetimes of being one of the strongest beings on the planet.

“I’m sorry, Master. I have only one desire beyond tempting people into giving their souls over to you,” I say softly, keeping my eyes on the ground.

“And what guarantees do I have that you’ll continue to serve me well if I bring your little girlfriend back?” Lucifer demands. “After all, Mammon became a useless little simp after he married Phoebe.”

“Penelope,” I correct automatically. “And I can assure you I will not become a ‘useless simp,’ as you so graciously put it.”

Lucifer snorts, rolling his eyes in a way that would be almost human if not for the infernal glow behind them.

“That’s what they all say. Until love rots their brains and takes their claws.

” He taps a manicured talon against his ruby cravat pin, studying me as though deciding whether to gut me or grant my wish.

I force my shoulders to stay relaxed, though every muscle is like a bowstring ready to snap. “I will do what I promised,” I say, steady as stone. “Drusilla is all I want. Everything else is yours.”

His grin is slow and sin-slick, stretching across perfect white teeth. “All mine,” he echoes, tasting the words like wine. “You do say the prettiest things, Rapha. The

others lack your... flair.”

He flicks a careless hand toward a servant who scuttles in with a platter of honeyed locusts.

Lucifer plucks one up, eyes sparkling with glee, and crunches it with theatrical delight.

“Oh, these are delightful,” he muses, as though we’re discussing the weather.

Then, as if bored by the entire performance, his focus returns to me, and his expression sharpens.

“Keep up your quota,” he warns, voice dropping to a note that chills me even after everything I’ve done. “I will not suffer disappointment.”

My jaw tightens, but I swallow the bitterness clawing at my tongue. “Of course, Master.”

Lucifer leans back on his throne, golden embroidery catching the flicker of hellfire, his smile the definition of beautiful cruelty. “Very good, my pet demon. Let’s get this over with.” He snaps his fingers and huffs with an air of boredom.

Something...changes. It isn’t something I can see, hear, or smell—nothing so obvious. It’s a sensation, a relaxing of centuries’ worth of tension. But even though I can sense Drusilla’s presence in the world, she isn’t where I expected her to be...beside me.

“Where is she, Lucifer?” I demand, trying not to let my anger bite through the words.

“She’s out there,” Lucifer waves behind his head in a vague gesture. “Somewhere.”

“You mean she’s in the Above?” I say, my jaw clenching hard.

Lucifer shrugs. “Maybe?”

I can’t hold back my growl this time. It rumbles out of my chest, and I turn, ready to leave the hall to find my love.

But Lucifer isn’t quite done with me. Not yet.

“She’s in Screaming Woods,” he reveals as I reach the door.

I spin to face him. “The town where the people were transformed by the Frankenpunch?”

Lucifer nods, watching me carefully. “It seems to me she didn’t want to come straight back to you.”

His words punch me right in the stomach. I hate his games, but I have to play them. For Drusilla.

“Why?” I ask harshly.

Lucifer’s shrug is almost delicate, like a cat bored of tormenting a mouse. “Perhaps she no longer loves you. Or perhaps she wishes to find out what you’ve become before committing herself again. Mortals”—he pauses then laughs, a sound as bright as it is cruel—“well, they can be very changeable.”

My talons bite into my palms. “She’s mortal again?” I hiss through gritted teeth, fighting the red haze that threatens to drown me.

“Oh, did I neglect to mention that part?” he asks innocently.

His mouth turns down as he tuts. “Oh, Rapha. Did you honestly think I would return her to you as a vampire?” Lucifer’s eyes gleam with delighted malice as he leans forward, elbows resting casually on his gold-embroidered knees.

“No, no, my dear Rapha. That would hardly be sporting. Where is the fun in reuniting two perfect monsters? It’s so much more...

dramatic to see if you can win her heart again. ”

My fangs pierce my lower lip as I clench my jaw. Blood wells on my tongue, tasting of copper and fury. “You resurrected her human ,” I grind out, trying to keep my voice steady, “in a world she won’t understand, in a place crawling with predators, and you call that sporting?”

Lucifer’s grin is ice and fire all at once. “Don’t look so wounded. You know I adore a good love story, especially one dripping with potential tragedy.”

I stare at him, trying to find the words, but none can contain the rage vibrating through every bone in my body. My talons flex again, itching to rip his smirking face apart.

“She’s vulnerable,” I manage at last, swallowing the scream clawing up my throat. “You’ve left her vulnerable.”

Lucifer’s eyes widen theatrically. “Why, Rapha, you almost sound... protective.” He taps one perfectly polished nail against his ruby pin. “How terribly sweet. And yet you are the demon of greed now. Surely you understand the price of a bargain?”

I look away because if I look at him one second longer, I might truly try to kill him. And that would end with my skull decorating his throne room.



“You said if I took Mammon’s place, you would bring her back to me,” I say, forcing my voice to stay low, steady, dangerous. “ Back to me. ”

Lucifer shrugs again, all breezy indifference. “She is back, is she not? Alive, breathing, with that delectable heart still beating away in her lovely little chest. It’s not my fault she did not choose to come to you directly.”

He leans back and bites into another honeyed locust, chewing as though savoring a fine vintage.

“But look on the bright side, Rapha. You get to chase her. Woo her. Convince her that all of this”—he gestures vaguely at my crimson eyes, at my talons, at the hellfire dancing along the marble—“is still worth loving.”

A muscle in my cheek jumps. I think of Drusilla, of her laughter, her warmth, the way she once looked at me like I was salvation instead of damnation, and I almost break.

Almost.

I draw in a breath that tastes of brimstone. “Where exactly in Screaming Woods?”

Lucifer gives me a fox’s grin, all teeth and triumph. “What would be the fun in telling you? Go on, my demon. Hunt your precious mortal. Let’s see if love truly can conquer all.”

He flicks his wrist in dismissal, a final bored wave. “I will, of course, expect your next quota of souls as usual.”

I turn on my heel, every step coiled with hate, and leave the throne room before I do something that would get me flayed for eternity.

Drusilla.

She's a mortal. Alone in Screaming Woods. Likely terrified.

My mind chants her name with every step I take, every heartbeat echoing in the hollow place where my soul used to live.

I must find her.

As I walk through the Below, the floor beneath me morphs into a gravel path in Screaming Woods. Pulling the chain from beneath my shirt, I wrap my fingers around the locket I've held onto for centuries.

My cold, dead, demonic heart squeezes with fear. Nobody touches her ever again. No one will ever get close enough to hurt her again.

I will destroy any who dare to try.

But first, I must find her.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Drusilla

Blood. I taste blood.

It lingers like smoke on my tongue.

And my body feels strange. As though it isn't mine.

I keep my eyes closed, but the darkness is too much to bear. Everything is too much to bear. Too much sensation.

The rough press of linen against my skin, the cold bite of air, the dizzying pull in my veins like I've been unspooled and put back together all wrong. My heart thuds hard against my ribs—too hard, too human—and terror spikes through me.

I feel...fragile. Mortal. The word slices through me like a blade.

No. No, that can't be.

I was changed. I remember fangs and shadows and freedom. I remember him.

Rapha.

Where is he?

I force my eyes open, bracing for the worst, and find only unfamiliar walls gilded by a faint light source and the soft whistle of a night breeze.

I'm alone. I'm afraid. Fear keeps me silent, trapping my breath as a dull ache blooms in my chest. The sensation is like the memory of pain. Of being stabbed in the heart.

My body jerks. My fingertips twitch as the phantom pain flickers through my ribs. A scream, raw and unfinished, lodges in my throat. A memory or a dream?

I'm not in immediate danger, but still the fear remains. Why?

The shadows press in around me, unfamiliar and too still. Am I in the home I so desperately wanted to share with Rapha? Where is he?

I move on the bed beneath me, which is far softer than anything I've ever lain on before, and sit up. I can hear things now, and my eyes are becoming accustomed to the faint glow of moonlight seeping through a window.

I walk toward it. The floor beneath my feet is cold and smooth, not stone, not earth—something artificial. I tread carefully, like prey sensing a predator. My hand slips on the transparent material covering the window. I brush it aside and look through the... glass? Yes, that's the word for it.

Fresh fear grips me. What is that faint humming sound? And why am I thinking in odd words?

Lights flicker and blink at me from buildings.

More lights zoom past, illuminating the room.

I gasp as they reveal the luxurious bed linens, the orbs fixed to the ceiling, and the strange pictures hanging on the walls.

Words come easily as I scan the surrounding space: bed, chair, nightstand, closet.

Yet everything here is foreign—elegant, modern, and magical.

None of it makes sense. It feels like walking through someone else's dream.

“What is going on?” I whisper to the universe, expecting to hear my own language. The words that leave my mouth are unfamiliar, yet I know them, just as I know the words for all the strange items around me.

They are...English?

What is that? It's different from the words I knew.

The explanation comes to me as I hesitate in front of the gauzy fabric hanging from a rod over the window. I'm acquiring a new language. My old tongue was very different. Before I...died.

I blink, lost, as more comes to me. More language. More memories. I sink to the floor as the truth finally reveals itself. Those last days of love and splendor in Rapha's arms, his beautiful gray eyes, his... bite.

He made me his lover, a vampire, but then my father... killed me.

The memory rushes in like a tide: my father's face twisted in cold rage as he plunged the stake into my chest. The torment in Rapha's eyes as he kneeled in my blood, holding me as I died.

My hand flutters to my chest, feeling the pain all over again, the betrayal, the devastation of those final moments with the man I loved

A sob starts, then becomes a wail of grief. Is this place heaven? Hell? I'm unsure, but I don't care because tears flood my eyes and my breath lodges in my throat. I can't

see, I can't breathe. Terror overwhelms me. I scream, but nobody is here to answer.

Where is my Rapha?

I move back to the bed. What is this place? Where am I?

"Rapha?" I call out, hoping he can explain all of this.

Is this another stage of being after death? Or has he used some kind of dark magic to transport me to a new world? Did he arrive in time to save me from my father, after all? Perhaps my memories of dying are false.

My mind races, and adrenaline courses through me in a flood that will not be contained.

"Rapha!" I call to him with my voice, mind, heart, and soul.

I collapse on the bed. I have no idea where I am, what this world is, or where Rapha is.

I tense as I hear the trickle of running water coming from behind a closed door.

I move toward it and push it open. A light flickers on overhead, revealing a white room with a trough of some kind.

A bathtub? Is that the right word? And a...

toilet? What could that possibly be for?

I stare at it, seeing water at the bottom, and realize that's where the sound is coming from.

My gaze moves to the sink, which features two smooth silver taps.

Water rushes from one as I lift the lever.

I step back, surprised by the magic. What is this enchantment?

I depress the lever, and the water stops.

Why are there two? I lift the other one, and in seconds, steam emerges from the tap. It can't be...

I dip my fingers in the stream of water, pulling them back quickly. This enchanted water is hot.

Lifting my gaze to the looking glass attached to the wall over the sink, I gaze at the face staring back at me. Familiar. But not.

My long, ebony hair falls in tangles around my shoulders. My deep brown eyes are wide with uncertainty. My skin still holds the warm olive tone I was born with. My full lips, high cheekbones, and rounded chin look the same.

But everything feels different.

I check my teeth, then my throat, searching for the echo of fang marks that should be there, of the power that briefly thrummed through my veins like a symphony. But now, there is no paranormal strength, no unnatural speed, no feral hunger.

Just a heartbeat, steady, human, and fragile, pounding in my ears.

My knees threaten to buckle, and I grip the edge of the sink to stay upright. I remember dying. I remember Rapha's hands on my face, the taste of eternity, the way

he made me his. I remember the freedom that came with that darkness.

But now...

Now I'm human again.

Mortal.

Terrified tears slide down my cheek, but this time, I dash them away angrily. I cannot afford fear. I survived Cassian. I survived death. I can survive this—whatever this is.

I take another steadying breath and stare into the mirror, into the dark depths of my eyes.

I will survive. I will find him.

Because somewhere out there, Rapha is waiting.

The Roman soldier and vampire I fell in love with would not abandon me.

But what if he takes too long? What if my father comes?

No sooner does the thought enter my mind than I hear the shuffle of feet in the bedchamber. Oh, Gods, he's here! My father has found me again. He's back to finish what he'd started, to make my nightmare a reality.

Panic seizes my spine, a cold lance of dread that buckles my knees. No, no, please, not again.

I scan the room with frantic eyes, searching for anything that could serve as a weapon. My gaze lands on a long-handled object leaning against a corner, white



bristles flaring from its end. Not a sword or a dagger, but it will have to do.

I snatch it up, gripping the unfamiliar object like a spear. My heart hammers against my ribs, each beat a frantic prayer.

The footsteps grow closer, slow and sure like a hunter.

I back against the wall, brandishing the odd stick, bristles aimed forward as though I could fend off an entire legion. The handle slips in my sweaty grip, and I choke back a sob.

Steady, Drusilla. Steady.

The door creaks open. A tall, dark shape fills the frame, horns crowning his head, eyes smoldering red like dying coals. The bristles of my stolen weapon tremble in front of me.

His voice is a low rumble, rolling through my bones like a storm.

“Drusilla.”

I freeze.

That voice.

He steps into the light, draped in black, familiar yet terrifying. He looks like my Rapha, but not.

My heart wrenches. “Rapha?”

He goes still, crimson eyes softening as a thousand emotions collide behind them.

“It’s me.” His mouth twitches with the smile that never failed to seduce me. “Were you planning to beat me to death with a toilet brush, love?”

My makeshift weapon wobbles dangerously in my grasp. Heat flushes my cheeks as a raw, strangled sob breaks past my lips.

Of course. Of course, I’d greet my one true love with a brush used to clean a toilet.

“Drusilla,” he breathes again, softer this time.

My name on his lips is like a salve on an old wound. I want to run to him, to bury myself in his arms the way I once did.

But my body won’t move.

I can only stare, taking in the impossible sight of him.

Rapha. And yet...not.

He is taller somehow, broader, as if power is woven into his bones.

Black horns curve elegantly from his dark hair, catching the light like polished onyx.

His eyes, once a cool gray I could drown in, now burn an unholy crimson.

And his hands—Gods, those hands that worshiped me so tenderly—end in curved talons.

He is still Rapha.

But he is also something else.

My grip tightens on the ridiculous toilet brush, though the gesture feels foolish even to me.

“Look at you,” I whisper, my voice a wisp of smoke. “What...what have you done?”

His jaw clenches, and a flash of pain crosses his handsome features. “I did what I had to,” he says, the words weighted like chains. “To bring you back.”

I blink hard, swallowing a knot of emotion. “You...you did this for me?”

Rapha nods, stepping closer. His scent hits me, dark spice and earthy musk. It’s so achingly familiar that it almost buckles my knees.

“I made a deal with the devil,” he says roughly, his eyes searching my face like he’s starving for every tiny change. “I became the demon of greed, Drusilla. So I could bring you back.”

My heart twists, and a ragged sob climbs my throat. I lower the brush, which suddenly feels too heavy to hold. “You sold yourself for me.”

His crimson eyes burn, glistening with something that makes them almost human again. “There was never a choice,” he rasps. “It was always you.”

My resistance folds, and I throw myself at him, clinging to the strange, powerful shape of him. The horns, the talons, the heat rolling off his skin—I don’t care.

He wraps his demon-strong arms around me, crushing me to his chest, and for the first time since waking in this strange world, I feel safe.

“Rapha,” I breathe against his throat, the word breaking on a sob. “What have they done to us?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he murmurs, burying his trembling lips in my hair. “I did what it took to get you back. To keep you.”

I close my eyes and let the scent of him anchor me.

He picks me up and carries me to the bedchamber, sitting on the edge of the bed with me in his lap. I curl into him, my body recognizing the man it loves, even if my mind is still struggling to catch up.

“I don’t know where I am. I have so many confusing memories,” I whisper against his neck.

His lips brush my forehead. “It will all make sense soon, love. Just let me hold you for a few minutes. I’ve waited so long to have you in my arms again.”

We’re both silent for several minutes, reveling in the heat of each other, in the impossibility of being together again. His heartbeat is steady against my cheek, a strange, slow rhythm that seems almost human. I suppose him having a functioning heart is another “benefit” of becoming a greed demon.

The world feels wrong, my memories like shattered glass, but in Rapha’s arms, I can breathe.

I tilt my head, catching a glimpse of those crimson eyes. There is so much pain there. So much hope.

And so much love.

“You kept it,” I murmur, touching the locket that rests against his chest.

“Of course. It was like carrying a piece of you against my heart.”

I smile, humbled by his admission. “Where am I?”

“This is the Blackbriar Inn. It’s on the edge of a small town called Screaming Woods. I’ll take you out when you’re ready, once we’ve talked. Show you this new world.”

“Okay,” I say simply, not sure how else to respond. My location means nothing to me apart from the word inn . At least that’s something I’m familiar with.

“So, you’re a demon now?” I ask, sensing the new darkness clinging to him, something more profound than simply his new demon persona.

His arms tighten around me. “Yes,” he admits as if he’s confessing to a sin. “A demon of greed. Lucifer’s personal collector.”

A shiver skates across my skin at the name, but I force myself to stay still, stay close. “What... what does that mean?”

His crimson gaze flickers, the glow dimming with regret.

“It means I trade in souls, Dru. I tempt them, reap them, deliver them to Hell. It means I wear these horns”—he taps the right one—“these talons, and these eyes.” He tries to smile, but it falters.

“But it also means I was able to bring you back.”

I rest my hand against his chest, feeling the slow, monstrous beat of his heart. “You weren’t jesting when you said you made a deal with the devil,” I whisper, unable to keep the ache from my voice.

“For you,” he says fiercely, unrepentantly. “Only you.”

Tears prick my eyes, but I blink them away. If Rapha can sacrifice his soul, I can bear this new world. I can bear anything.

“You shouldn’t have,” I murmur, though my traitorous heart swells at the truth of it.

His lips brush my temple reverently. “But I did.”

We sit in silence, the weight of the centuries between us pressing into our bones. He holds me like he might break if he lets go, and I hold him the same way.

Finally, I lift my head, brushing away a tear. “When we go outside, will it be...safe?”

His grin is sharp, a flash of his old arrogance mingled with demon confidence. “Not for anyone who tries to hurt you.”

I let out a shaky laugh, burying my face against his throat once more, breathing him in.

Safe. With Rapha, I will always be safe.

No matter what we’ve become.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Rapha

I still can't believe she's here in my arms. She's as beautiful as I remember, all lush curves and dark, hypnotic eyes, her ebony hair spilling across my chest like midnight silk. But it's more than beauty. It's her . The spark, the fire, the wildness. The woman who once chose me over an empire.

Gods, how I've missed her. I want to ravish her, consume her, revel in her essence. I want to bury myself deep inside her until my cock is sated and my soul reclaims the peace I've only ever found with her. But I hold back. She's terrified. Uncertain of this new world. I need to give her time.

I've waited centuries. I can wait a little longer.

I stroke my claws gently along her spine through the thin cotton shift she wears, careful not to scratch her soft skin. Every beat of her heart drums against me like a warning: fragile, fragile, fragile. It terrifies me more than any blade ever could.

She shouldn't be human. She should be strong, eternal, untouchable. But Lucifer couldn't resist making it a test, setting me up to break my heart all over again.

My demon power simmers under my skin, demanding I take what is mine, protect what is mine, ruin the world if anyone dares threaten her. But for now, I force it down, bury it beneath the tenderness that only Drusilla has ever coaxed out of me.

She shifts in my lap, looking up at me with those soft, wary eyes. So much confusion swims in them, so much pain. It nearly shatters me.

“I’ll help you remember, mea amora ,” I promise roughly. “You’re safe with me. Always.”

Her lower lip trembles. I brush it with my thumb, the sight of her vulnerability gutting me.

“Why here?” she asks. “Why this place...Screaming Woods?”

“Lucifer said you chose this place. That you chose not to come back to me immediately.”

Her brows knit together. “I did? I...don’t remember. It wasn’t a conscious choice. One minute, I was dead, and the next, I awoke here. Alone.”

I press my lips to her forehead, trying to soothe the fear in every tense line of her body.

“Screaming Woods is a crossroads. It’s become something of a hybrid town since the Halloween mishap, when a potion turned the inhabitants into magical creatures,” I explain.

“Perhaps you chose it subconsciously as it was easier to anchor you here.”

“Or perhaps Lucifer lied to you,” she says, holding my gaze, “because I would choose to return to your side in any lifetime, Rapha.”

I swallow hard at the sincerity in her eyes. “Yes, it’s quite possible that Lucifer lied to me. He does like to play his little mind games. But I won’t let anything happen to you,” I vow again, needing her to believe me.

She sighs, leaning back against me, exhausted.



I hold her tighter, inhaling her lavender and sunshine scent.

Drusilla shifts in my lap again, moving to straddle me and cupping my face in her soft hands. Her touch is hesitant, almost as if she's afraid I'll vanish. I lean into it, starved for her warmth, for the softness only she's ever offered me.

"Rapha," she breathes, her voice a threadbare whisper.

I lower my head, letting my lips brush hers, featherlight at first. A question.

When she doesn't pull away, I deepen the kiss, pouring every moment of agony and longing and hope into it.

Her lips part for me, warm and yielding.

A groan rumbles from deep in my chest as our tongues tangle and I taste her again.

It's familiar. It's new. It's everything.

I kiss her until we're both breathless, until her hands clutch at my horns like she can anchor herself in me. I kiss her until she melts against me, soft and trusting, and my demon heart nearly breaks from the perfection of it.

When I finally pull back, she's dazed and flushed, eyes glassy with emotion.

"I love you," I murmur against her temple.

Her breath hitches, but her voice is fierce. "I love you, too."

I gather her close and shift us farther onto the bed, pulling the covers around us. She sighs as I settle her against my chest, sliding one leg between mine. For a moment, it

feels like nothing has changed, like we're back beneath the cliffs, tangled together, the world forgotten.

Sleep takes her quickly, exhaustion winning over fear. I watch her breathe, memorizing each rise and fall of her chest, each flutter of her lashes, the warmth of her skin.

Eventually, I close my eyes, holding her tightly through the night.

No nightmares find us.

When morning comes, a pale dawn pressing through the curtains, I stroke her hair gently and kiss her forehead.

"Drusilla," I whisper. "Wake up, love."

She stirs, blinking at me with a groggy smile that nearly undoes me.

"Do you feel strong enough?" I ask, careful to keep my voice soft. "There's a world out there I'd like to show you. Screaming Woods is... strange. But I won't let it harm you."

She bites her lip, searching my eyes, then nods. "If you're with me, Rapha, I can face anything."

I smile—my first real, unguarded smile for centuries—and press a kiss to her lips before lifting her into my arms. "Then let me show you." I lower her to her feet and thread our fingers together, tugging her toward the door.

I'm ready to face whatever waits beyond it.

Together. “Let me show you this new world.”

“Will it be cold?” she asks, plucking at the delicate cotton shift she’s still wearing.

I frown. She can’t go outside like that.

I snap my fingers, and she’s suddenly dressed in tight blue jeans, an emerald green blouse, and a pair of black Converse.

She’s adorably sexy, even in this modern attire.

I swallow hard. Fuck, those jeans do incredible things for her curves.

I want to trace my hands over her hips and cup her rounded ass, but she pushes away from me to stare at the clothes.

“You have this kind of power now?” she gasps, looking down at the silk blouse. “It’s so fine.”

“I have many new powers. I tried to resurrect you for centuries. I performed black magic, searched out ancient tomes, bargained and traded for anything that might offer me hope. Nothing worked until Lucifer gave me a solution I couldn’t refuse—to tempt humans into bargaining their souls for favors and reaping those souls when it was time to collect.

In exchange, he promised to resurrect you. ”

“You wanted me back that much? Loved me that much?” she asks softly.

My throat works around a knot so tight it feels like it might choke me. “More than you will ever comprehend,” I rasp. “Every moment you were gone was worse than

death. I would have burned down heaven itself to have you in my arms again.”

I don't tell her that with every soul I reap, I sink deeper into the darkness. That it pulls at me like the need for blood when I was a vampire. How many souls can I reap before I lose myself completely?

I push the thought away. I'd sacrifice myself a thousand times over to be exactly where I am right now, standing before my woman, her eyes shining with love and awe.

Slowly, Drusilla reaches out and brushes her fingers along my jaw, studying my horns, my crimson eyes, and the sharp lines of my demon form as if she's memorizing me all over again.

“I don't care what you've become,” she whispers. “You're still mine.”

A rough, broken sound tears from my throat, half a growl, half a sob. I close the small distance between us and kiss her again, desperate and raw. She tastes like home, like hope. Like everything I've fought for.

When I pull back, I rest my forehead against hers. “Stay close to me out there,” I warn, letting a bit of my demon edge bleed through. “Screaming Woods is...unpredictable. And you're human now.”

Drusilla nods, her lips quirking faintly in a familiar, fearless smile. “I survived a Roman father, an arranged marriage, and death. I think I can survive Screaming Woods.”

Gods, I love this woman.

I press another kiss to her temple. “That's my girl.”

She hesitates. “Won’t they, um, notice you out there?” Her head tilts to the right, and the gesture is so familiar and alluring that my poor, tiny demon heart misses a beat.

“This place is magical, my love. We’ll be the least noticeable of all the beings we’ll see outside, I assure you. Come on. You’re going to love this.”

I open the door, and we step into the hallway, ready to face the strange, dangerous wonderland of Screaming Woods, side by side.

Drusilla stands frozen outside the inn’s battered wooden door, clutching my hand like a lifeline, her eyes wide as they sweep over our surroundings.

It’s a place like no other—a town of curses and second chances, forever changed by magic that should never have touched mortal soil. An ancient magic pulses beneath the earth here and has spilled into the neighboring town of Fable Forest.

Signs adorn crooked buildings, their letters rearranging themselves as though the words can’t settle on a single truth. Gaslights burn in twisted iron sconces that seem to breathe with a faint, unnatural life. The street ripples as if it might shift direction underfoot at any moment.

And the people—Gods, the people.

They wander the square with an easy confidence that belies the monstrous power sleeping beneath their skin.

A centaur in ripped jeans. A girl with flowers growing from her hair.

A gargoyle perched lazily on the edge of a lamppost, his wings folded like a predator in wait.

A group of witches bargaining over candied apples at a market cart.

Children made of swirling shadow race each other across the square, their laughter impossibly bright.

Drusilla's gaze follows them, her lips parting in wonder.

I watch as she takes it all in. Her breathing stutters, and her eyes widen with wonder, awe, and fear.

Then she lifts her chin with the same unbreakable courage that lured me to her centuries ago.

Even in this broken, enchanted town, where nightmares sleep with their eyes open, she is the bravest soul I have ever known.

"Rapha," she breathes, "I don't understand half of what I'm seeing."

"You don't have to," I murmur, brushing my knuckles down her arm to steady her. "You just have to stay by my side."

She turns to me then, and I see the spark in her dark eyes as they lock onto mine, that spark I thought I'd lost.

"Show me," she says, voice steady even as her hands tremble. "Show me everything."

My smile is sharp, hungry, and impossibly grateful as it tugs at the corner of my mouth. "As you wish, mea amora," I say, leading her down the crooked street.

"The noise..." Drusilla stumbles a little as we walk along the street.

“It must be overwhelming, but I promise, Screaming Woods will feel like home soon.” I squeeze her hand, noticing how small it feels in mine.

Everything about me is bigger now. Will she still be able to take me? She’s so tiny, so delicate, that it worries me. Would I rip her in two? Gods, will I last more than two seconds after a record-breaking period of abstinence?

We don’t make it far before Drusilla stops abruptly, tugging my hand with a surprising burst of strength. Her wide eyes fix on a shop across the square.

“The Spellbound Shelf,” she reads from the hand-carved wooden sign hanging above the door, its letters shifting and rearranging themselves in a lazy, almost playful script.

The warm golden glow spilling out of the front windows makes it look less threatening than the other shops on the street—a haven, almost.

Books, I think, watching her eyes soften with longing. She was always hungry for knowledge, desperate to read what the world tried to keep from her.

“Do you want to go in?” I ask, even though the answer is obvious.

She nods, a hint of that fire in her expression. “Please.”

I push the door open, a small chime ringing from somewhere high in the rafters. The smell of paper and ink wraps around us instantly, mingling with something richer—cinnamon and sugar from Conjure and Crumb, the bakery a few doors down.

The shelves seem to move on their own, adjusting their height to match the reader, shifting titles forward as though trying to tempt us with secrets.

Behind the long, scuffed counter stands a woman wearing a colorful maxi dress, her chestnut hair tied back with a silk ribbon. She looks up from a glowing parchment and greets us without a shred of fear, her dark blue eyes twinkling.

“Welcome to The Spellbound Shelf,” she greets. “I’m Alice. Let me know if anything calls to you. Sometimes, the books here have a mind of their own.”

Beside her, a man leans lazily against one of the bookcases, massive and broad-shouldered, with an easy grin. A beanie covers his head, which seems to move with a life of its own. Green eyes track me with a predator’s calm curiosity, telling me he sees beyond my enchantment to the demon beneath.

“Gordy,” he says, offering a nod. “Don’t mind the shelves. They like to test newcomers.”

“I’m Drusilla, and this is Rapha,” Drusilla introduces us.

“We’re...new in town,” I add, keeping it simple.

Drusilla steps closer to me, her voice barely a whisper as she asks, “They’re...like us?”

I smile faintly, pressing a reassuring kiss to her hair. “They’re safe, ” I murmur, sensing that’s true.

Alice’s eyes soften as she looks between us, and a quiet understanding seems to pass through her gaze. “Whatever you’re searching for,” she tells Drusilla gently, “you might find a piece of it here.”

Drusilla’s shoulders relax a little. She even lets out a tiny laugh when a slim green volume pops itself off a high shelf and drops into her waiting hands, its title, Where



Shadow Meets Flame, shimmering in strange, archaic lettering.

Something eases inside me as her eyes light up with wonder, instead of fear, pushing back the darkness that has been crouching over my soul.

Maybe Screaming Woods wasn't such a bad choice after all.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Drusilla

The book in my hands is warm, almost breathing , as if it knows me already. I trace the title with a shaky finger, still trying to catch up with a world that refuses to sit still, and then glance up as more footsteps echo on the wooden floor.

A tall, striking man enters, dressed in a perfectly tailored shirt that hugs powerful shoulders.

His hair is pulled back from a chiseled face—except his hair is snakes , flicking their tongues curiously.

Beside him, a heavily pregnant woman practically radiates joy along with her healthy glow, as if she's never known fear in her life.

“Sorry we’re late for lunch, Alice,” the woman says with a grin, one hand stroking her stomach protectively. “Gideon was wrestling with the stroller assembly. I told him to read the instructions, but you know what these gorgons are like.”

“Don’t slander me, sweetheart,” the snake-haired man teases, pressing a sweet kiss to her temple. “I conquered it, eventually.”

Alice laughs, shaking her head. “Verity, Gideon, meet Rapha and Drusilla. They’re new to town.”

Verity’s eyes light up. “Oh! It’s so nice to meet you!” She beams at me with such open kindness that it nearly breaks me. “You’re new? Welcome to Screaming Woods,

the weirdest place you'll ever love."

I open my mouth, trying to form words, but my attention is momentarily hijacked by one of the snakes poking out from under Gideon's collar. It blinks at me.

"Um," I manage, "you have a snake on your shoulder."

Gideon's grin goes wide, a little wicked. "Ah, that's Marius. Don't mind him. He's nosy. The others are asleep."

Verity rolls her eyes fondly. "And snoring," she adds, elbowing her husband gently.

At that moment, Gordy reaches up to adjust his beanie, and a small, green snake pops its head out, tongue darting with clear curiosity.

"Sheila," Gordy sighs, "please behave."

Sheila ignores him completely, locking eyes with me and giving a dramatic little hissss that sounds suspiciously like a greeting.

Verity chuckles, then eyes me with a playful spark. "You get used to it, trust me. Gorgon snakes are like moody cats. They want all your attention until they don't."

Rapha snorts softly, but I catch the relief in his eyes, as if he's grateful I'm smiling instead of panicking.

Alice props one hip against the counter and smirks. "It's nice to have another broody man around, Rapha. Gideon and Gordy were getting cocky, thinking they'd cornered the market on tragic supernatural brooding."

Gideon clutches his chest dramatically. "Excuse me, tragic and broody is a classic

look. Don't shame the style."

Verity pats her belly and grins at me. "Listen, we're having a baby shower in a couple of weeks. Our first little half-human, half-gorgon miracle. You have to come. Please. I'd love more female energy in the room with all these scaly boys."

My laugh surprises me. It's light and real, the first since waking up in this strange place. "I'd love that," I breathe. "Thank you."

Rapha slides his hand around my waist, and I feel his tension ease. For the first time, I believe we might have a place here, strange as it is.

Alice leans forward, conspiratorial. "And if you ever need help adjusting, or you want to hex someone who annoys you, I'm your witch. Well, a witch with a dash of ancient gorgon-huntress DNA, but let's not split hairs."

"Ancient huntress?" I echo, eyes wide.

Alice shrugs, grinning. "It's complicated. Let's just say I'm good at handling guys with snakes for hair."

Everyone laughs, even Rapha, low and warm, and the sound melts something frozen in my chest.

Maybe I could belong here.

Maybe we both could.

After we say goodbye to Alice, Gordy, Gideon, and Verity, Rapha leads me back out into the square, my fingers still tangled with his. The world outside the bookshop feels less terrifying now, less like a waking nightmare, and more like a place that

might let us start again.

We wander past a fountain where fish leap through water that glows faintly blue, and Rapha's attention snags on a sign across the street.

"Hungry?" he asks, one dark brow arched.

I laugh as my stomach tightens and growls. "Starving."

I don't tell him that food isn't the only thing I'm starving for.

Rapha is larger than life in every way, and my body craves the intimate connection we once shared so long ago.

Although for me, the years passed in the blink of an eye.

They must have seemed endless for Rapha.

I'm still humbled by the truth of it, that he waited, that he sacrificed everything for me.

Rapha's thumb brushes the inside of my wrist, like he can sense the tangled ache of my thoughts. His crimson eyes soften, warm enough to melt me where I stand.

"Come on," he murmurs, voice low and velvet-dark. "Let's feed you before I'm tempted to carry you back to the inn and skip food entirely."

Heat floods my cheeks, but I laugh, breathless and wild, letting him guide me toward the bakery.

It's tucked between a men's fashion shop and a candle stall, its name painted in

curling script: Conjure and Crumb.

The aroma drifting out the door is warm and sweet, with a note of something vaguely... dangerous.

Inside, the glass cases are filled with Soulspace Pies that sparkle faintly like they've been dusted with stardust, Dreamslip Eclairs that twitch as if dreaming, and Doom Donuts dripping violet glaze, pulsing faintly with something that might be forbidden magic.

Rapha orders a Hearthspell Croissant for me, and something dark and sticky for himself called a Sin Bun .

I bite into the golden, flaky croissant, which is still warm, and the moment it touches my tongue, time seems to slow . The bakery fades, the chatter softens. Flavors bloom in my mouth—butter and vanilla and some nameless warmth that tastes like a forgotten childhood dream.

Tears sting my eyes.

It's not just food. It's memory. Safety. Joy.

Gods, it's been so long since I had anything this simple... or this perfect.

"You're crying," Rapha says, concerned.

I laugh through the tears. "It's just...so good."

He brushes my cheek with one knuckle, looking relieved. "Then have as many as you want."

We take our pastries outside, sitting on a low stone wall in the sunlight that feels somehow less bright, less punishing than the sun I remember.

While we're finishing up, two women approach. The first is tall and lean, her arms covered in tattoos that shimmer and shift under her skin, enchanted and alive. She wears ripped jeans and a tank top, hair tied up in a messy bun with beads woven into the strands.

"New faces!" she calls, bright and bold. "I'm Wren, of Ink and Intent." She offers her hand. I hesitate before taking it. Her grip is strong but warm.

Next to her stands a softer figure, round and serene, with gentle hazel eyes and a cascade of curly hair that looks like spun honey. A faint herbal fragrance clings to her, comforting and earthy.

"And I'm Mags," she says, smiling like sunshine. "I own Hearth & Hollow, the apothecary. If you ever need tea to calm your nerves or something a bit... stronger, you come and find me."

"More bloody tourists," a gravelly voice grumbles before I can answer.

I turn to see an older man in a long, moth-eaten coat, his cane carved to resemble the snarl of a wolf. A wide-brimmed hat shadows his sharp eyes, which are the exact color of ancient parchment.

"Mr. Penumbra," Wren teases, "these aren't tourists. They're new to town."

I'm not sure how Wren has concluded that we're not tourists, but I'm quickly learning that the people in Screaming Woods seem to know things—perhaps it's magical intuition.

He snorts. “That’s even worse.” His gaze pins me, and it’s so sharp that it makes my breath catch. “Don’t break anything,” he orders before stomping toward a narrow shop crammed with maps and globes.

“Don’t mind him,” Mags whispers conspiratorially. “He’s a sweetheart deep down. Way, way down.”

Wren laughs, her tattoos rippling like water. “If you ever want ink, come and see me. I’ll give you a proper welcome-to-town design.” She purses her lips thoughtfully, a knowing gleam in her eye. “Maybe a stake through a heart, or something softer if you like.”

Rapha bristles a little at the mention of a stake, and Wren notices, smirking. “Relax, demon boy. Just a joke. Some of us see beneath the facade.”

My lips twitch despite myself. “Thank you,” I manage, still absorbing the strangeness of it all as Wren and Mags wave and head on their way.

I savor the last buttery flakes of my croissant, letting it linger on my tongue. Everything feels so bright, so loud, so alive, but Rapha is here, steady and strong, grounding me in this impossible new world.

He watches me with that hungry gleam, crimson eyes soft and dangerous all at once. The sun catches on his horns, making them look like polished onyx. I shiver, but it’s not from fear.

“Was it good?” he murmurs, brushing a crumb from the corner of my mouth with a talon-tipped finger.

My heart flips, the intimacy of the gesture undoing me.



“It was perfect,” I breathe. “But...”

“But?”

My breath hitches as I meet his gaze. The world seems to fade around us—the strange shifting street, the flickering lights, the scent of cinnamon.

“I want more ,” I confess, my voice barely more than a whisper. “But...not food.”

His eyes flare, the color deepening to molten red.

“More?” he echoes, his voice a rough promise.

I nod, unable to look away. “I need you, Rapha. All of you. I need to feel you again. To remember us.”

His jaw tightens, his hands flexing like he’s fighting to stay calm.

“Drusilla,” he growls, low and reverent.

Before I can reply, he leans in and captures my lips in a kiss so fierce it steals my breath. The taste of him, dark and sweet, floods me with heat. I cling to him, my fingers curling into the front of his shirt, as though I could drag him inside me with sheer will alone.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

The kiss deepens, losing any hint of restraint. His tongue slides against mine, demanding, worshipful, and I moan into him, the sound raw and hungry.

People bustle past us in the square, but I don't see them, don't care. There is only this. Only him.

I gasp when his claws graze lightly over the small of my back, teasing the sensitive skin beneath my blouse. My entire body arches, responding shamelessly.

"Rapha," I pant, breaking the kiss, breathing hard. "Please. Take me back to the inn. Now."

His eyes darken, the red pupils blown wide.

"You're sure?" he asks, voice strained with barely leashed desire.

"Yes." I nod, heart pounding. "I need to... connect with you. I can't wait any longer."

A low, guttural growl rumbles in his chest.

"Then hold on, mea amora ."

He lifts me easily, one arm locked around my waist, and in a swirl of wind and shadow, the square vanishes, replaced by the familiar, creaking floorboards of our inn room.

I can barely breathe. My pulse is a wild drum, echoing the rush of blood in my veins.

Rapha looks at me like a starved wolf, as if I'm his entire reason for existence, and every inch of me thrills with it.

His crimson eyes darken, and with a single snap of his talon-tipped fingers, the clothes he conjured for me vanish in a whisper of air, leaving me suddenly, startlingly naked.

My breath catches in shock as I glance down, cheeks flaming, then lift my eyes to his.

Rapha is bare too... and Gods , he's more than I remember, more than any mortal could ever be.

His body is broader, sculpted from shadows and raw power, every line carved with inhuman grace.

And he's bigger everywhere now, impossibly hard, so thick and long I tremble at the sight of him, both aroused and awed.

The cool air teases my nipples, making them pebble and ache, but Rapha's gaze burns hotter than any fire as it roams over me.

"Even more perfect than I remember," he rasps before he lowers his mouth to mine.

He kisses me hard. No gentle prelude, just raw, consuming hunger. My knees go weak, and he steadies me, one huge hand gripping the back of my neck while the other snakes around to cup my breast, his thumb brushing the sensitive tip until I moan into his mouth.

I'm shaking, desperate, needing him like air.

Rapha pulls back only long enough to lift me easily, carrying me to the bed like I

weigh nothing. His body covers mine in an instant, his warmth seeping into my bones, his scent dark and heady and overwhelming.

He kisses down my throat, slow and deliberate, leaving a trail of fire behind. When he reaches my breasts, he pauses, eyes gleaming with something darkly possessive.

“Mine,” he whispers, taking a nipple into his mouth and sucking hard enough to make me arch off the mattress.

Pleasure lances through me, sharp and dizzying. I gasp his name, my fingers buried in his hair, pulling him closer. Rapha growls against my skin and switches to the other breast, teasing and biting until I’m panting.

Then he moves lower, kissing down my stomach, making me writhe.

“Rapha, please?—”

He chuckles low, the sound vibrating through my belly. “Patience, mea amora. I’m going to taste you,” he warns, his voice rough silk, “and you’re going to let me.”

His shoulders wedge my thighs apart, spreading me wide, exposing me completely. The hunger in his crimson eyes is enough to make my heart stutter.

This is new. Does he mean...

He lowers his mouth to my throbbing core.

Gods, yes. I want him everywhere.

The first stroke of his tongue is so devastatingly gentle that I whimper, my hips bucking. Rapha anchors my thighs over his shoulders, his hands holding me open as

he licks me again, slower this time, savoring every ripple and hollow of my sex.

My entire body feels like it's dissolving. I've only ever known pleasure like this with Rapha, but I didn't know I could come apart from his mouth and tongue.

He circles my clit with the flat of his tongue, then sucks. I cry out, my hands scrabbling at the bed linens.

"Gods! Rapha?—"

"Come for me," he commands, voice deep and inhuman against my most sensitive flesh. "Now."

I shatter on his tongue, pleasure crashing over me like a violent wave. My body arches, my muscles locking tight as I climax, moaning his name like a broken prayer.

He doesn't stop. He keeps licking me through every aftershock until I'm trembling and weak and nearly sobbing from how good it feels.

Only then does he rise over me, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His smile is sharp, feral, and beautiful.

"I need to be inside you," he growls, leaning in to claim my mouth again.

I taste myself on his lips. "Please," I whisper desperately.

He positions himself at my entrance, the blunt head of his cock sliding through my wetness, probing, teasing. My hands fly to his shoulders, anchoring myself.

"Look at me," he orders.

I do. Gods, I do because there's nowhere else I want to look. His crimson eyes pin me in place, full of love, ruin, and salvation.

But before he can thrust, something changes.

He goes rigid above me, and the color drains from his face.

"Rapha?" I breathe, dread slicing through my pleasure-hazed mind.

He doesn't answer, staring past me, his eyes unfocused.

Rapha.

I startle at the voice. It echoes in the room like a blade across stone. Cold, ruthless, amused.

Rapha, you have work to do.

I lick my lips nervously. "Is that?—"

"Lucifer," Rapha says grimly. "His timing is impeccable as always."

My heart lurches in terror. I clutch Rapha's arms, trying to pull him back to me. "Don't listen," I plead, voice cracking. "Stay with me."

But Rapha's entire body is coiled tight, his jaw locked. Fury simmers in his eyes as he battles the command of his master.

Finish your duty, demon of greed, the voice insists. There are souls to be reaped.

Rapha lets out a snarl so feral it chills me to my marrow. His forehead drops to mine,

his breath coming in ragged gasps.

“I’m sorry,” he growls, his eyes dark with rage and regret. “I have to?—”

“No,” I beg, tears spilling. “Please, don’t leave me?—”

His lips crash into mine, desperate, brutal, as if he can pour every ounce of love into a single kiss.

When he pulls away, I see it in his eyes—the torment, the apology, the promise.

“I’ll come back to you,” he swears. “No matter what. Always.”

And then he’s gone, vanishing into thin air, leaving me aching, trembling, and utterly alone.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Drusilla

It almost feels like home.

Almost.

Sitting in the back garden of the ivy-covered manor deep in the northern part of Screaming Woods, I can finally relax. A little.

The place is brimming with old magic and hidden doors that fascinate me. Sometimes I find libraries behind those doors, sometimes it's a closet full of treasures that take my breath away. But sometimes, those doors hide hidden nightmares, and I've become cautious about opening them now.

Rapha moved us here three days ago, fulfilling the promises he made to me centuries ago.

He's brought me magnificent jewels and, once, cursed rubies that drew me into their sparkling depths before he pulled me away, hiding the jewels so that I wouldn't become ensnared by them again.

He brings me clothes with designer labels that settle perfectly on my curves, or so the enchanted mirror he brought me portrays.

What he hasn't given to me with magic, he's given to me with modern technology. I have a computer, a tablet, and a phone, all of which I'm terrified of. However, I do love television and often lose myself in the programs and movies for hours.



Still, I hate most of these modern “conveniences,” as he calls them. I stare out the window now, watching as my crisp white bed linens flutter in the breeze on the clothesline I put up between two trees. That awful drying machine can never compare with air-dried bed linens.

I’ve barely seen Rapha in the last three days as he’s been in the Below, fulfilling his obligations to Lucifer. He hasn’t touched me again, apart from a few chaste kisses, although he holds me possessively through the night, as if he can’t bear not to.

Despite his absence, I enjoy the silence and solitude here.

The inn was pleasant but always noisy, so Rapha brought us to this place.

He has a nasty habit of filling the beautiful space with magical objects and noisy machines.

I pull the plugs on the machines when he leaves, which annoys him, but I don’t need them.

I grew up in a time when everything had to be done by hand, and without those familiar tasks to ground me and give me time to meditate, I become flustered and overthink things.

“Dru?” Rapha calls from inside the house.

“I’m out here, Rapha,” I reply, looking toward the door.

I’m getting used to the additions to his appearance, but today, I see more darkness in him, like a cloud shimmering around him. It worries me. Is his work for Lucifer changing him?

“Why are you frowning, love?” Rapha asks, pulling me into his arms.

I rest my head against his chest and melt into his embrace.

“Nothing. I’m just glad you’re home.” I hold my face up for a kiss.

I’ve come to need these kisses, even if something or someone always seems to interrupt us before we can take it any further.

His lips brush mine softly at first, but I can taste the hunger coiled beneath, a wild, dangerous thing. His arms cage me against his chest, hard and unyielding, and his scent—dark spice and power—wraps around me like a spell I never want to break.

I’m desperate to be truly his again, but insecurity wiggles its way in.

He pauses, his mouth hovering over mine, his crimson eyes narrowed as they search my face.

“What is it?” he rumbles, tilting my chin up with one claw-tipped finger. “Something’s wrong. Tell me.”

I try to look away, but he won’t let me. His touch is gentle but unmovable, as if he could hold back all the world’s darkness with a single hand.

“Dru,” he growls, low and patient, “speak.”

Heat rises to my cheeks, shame swirling in my gut. I force the words out, raw and trembling. “It’s just... You haven’t touched me since the other night, when Lucifer stole you away.”

Rapha goes still. A muscle jumps in his jaw, and the darkness around him seems to

pulse.

“Drusilla.” My name is a rasp, full of anguish. “You think I don’t want you?”

I flinch at the ferocity in his voice. “I don’t know,” I whisper, blinking back tears. “You hold me, but you don’t touch me. You barely kiss me. I thought... maybe you don’t want me anymore.”

His entire frame shudders, and for a terrifying moment, I think he might explode. But then his forehead drops against mine, his breath coming ragged and hot.

“Amora mea,” he groans, his voice breaking, “I want you every fucking moment. I ache for you. But...”

“But?”

His arms tighten, claws digging lightly into my waist in a desperate hold.

“I feel dirty,” he spits, venom in every syllable, though not aimed at me.

“My hands are stained with greed, with taking, with death. I collect souls for Lucifer, Drusilla. Filthy, corrupted things. And then I come back to you—bright, sweet, good—and I don’t want to taint you with that filth.”

My heart twists so hard it hurts.

“You think you could taint me?” I ask, swallowing a sob. “After everything we’ve survived?”

He goes still again, but this time it’s like he’s listening to a truth he cannot bear to accept.

I press closer, my hands sliding to his face, cradling it. “Rapha,” I breathe, letting all my love pour out of me, “you could never taint me. You saved me. You chose me. You set me free. ”

His lips tremble under my fingertips, and a pained sound breaks from him.

I stand on tiptoe, kissing him slowly, sweetly, then deeper, until he groans into my mouth. When I break away, I look him dead in the eyes.

“Let me show you,” I whisper.

Without breaking eye contact, I sink to my knees.

Rapha’s eyes flare, turning molten, dangerous. “Drusilla?—”

“Hush,” I command softly, palms sliding up his thighs, feeling the iron heat of him. “Let me worship you, my love.”

He lets out a hoarse, strangled moan as I free his cock from his pants and wrap one hand around the thick, impossibly hard length of him.

“Gods,” I breathe, licking my lips. “You’re...beautiful.”

His claws flex against the air, as if he can’t decide whether to pull me up or keep me down.

I make the choice for him, taking him into my mouth, slow and reverent. His taste is dark, salty, and powerful, sending a fresh flood of heat through me.

“Fuck,” he growls, voice ragged, his hand sinking into my hair. “Dru?—”

I slide my lips down him, deeper, until he hits the back of my throat, and he jerks, muscles trembling. He tries to pull away, but I grip his thighs, refusing to let him. I'm a novice, working on instinct alone, but I let my want, my need, guide me.

I hollow my cheeks, working him with my lips and tongue, feeling him throb with every stroke. His growls shake the walls, low and feral, until he finally loses his fight and rocks into my mouth with a helpless rhythm.

I look up. The agony and ecstasy warring in his crimson eyes make me even bolder as I cup his heavy balls and roll them gently between my fingers.

He yanks me up so fast the world spins. His mouth crashes down on mine, all heat and desperation, as he lifts me in his arms and carries me to the bed.

"Mine," he snarls against my lips. "I'm going to bury myself so deep inside you, we'll never be apart again."

"Yes," I gasp, wrapping my legs around his waist. "Please, Rapha. Now."

Rapha lowers me to the bed so carefully, as if I might shatter, though there's nothing fragile left in me except my heart. My legs fall open for him instinctively, welcoming him, needing him.

His crimson eyes blaze, and he lowers himself between my thighs, the heat of his body pressing me into the soft linen. One large, claw-tipped hand cups my cheek, his thumb brushing a tear I didn't know had fallen.

"Tell me to stop," he rasps, voice ragged, "and I will."

"Never," I whisper, trembling. "I want this. I want you."

A growl vibrates deep in his chest. He shifts his hips, and the thick head of his cock brushes my entrance, so much bigger than before, stretching me already.

I gasp, gripping his forearms as anticipation knots tight in my belly.

“Breathe,” he commands gently, pressing a kiss to my lips.

Then he pushes forward, slowly at first, claiming me inch by impossibly thick inch. My body resists him, burning as he stretches me wider than I thought possible. A cry escapes me. It’s not pain exactly, but it’s intense, a delicious sting that blurs the line between pleasure and too much.

“Easy, mea amora,” he soothes, his voice breaking as he struggles to hold back. “You’re so tight. So perfect.”

He goes deeper. My body clenches instinctively, making him groan, a low, inhuman sound that rumbles through his massive frame.

“Rapha,” I whimper, nails digging into his arms. “It’s...too much.”

He freezes, sweat sheening his brow, muscles taut as stone. “Should I stop?”

“No,” I breathe, fighting through the dizzy overwhelm. “Wait. Let me...adjust.”

His forehead rests against mine, his breaths coming in ragged, tortured bursts. He pulses inside me, so big I swear I can feel him everywhere, as though he’s carved himself into my soul.

“Gods, you’re killing me,” he groans, one hand clutching my hip like an anchor while he braces his weight on the other. “I’d forgotten...You feel like heaven, Drusilla.”

I force myself to relax, focusing on the steady, pounding rhythm of his heart against my chest. I wiggle, finding a position that feels good. The pain begins to soften, melting into something fierce and bright, a pleasure that coils deep in my belly.

“Okay,” I whisper shakily. “I’m ready.”

He growls again, low and raw, and draws back before thrusting forward with a slow, relentless roll of his hips. I cry out, overwhelmed by how full I feel, how right this is.

“Look at me,” he commands, voice thick with need.

I do, and it’s like a lightning strike as our bond crackles to life, burning through every nerve.

Rapha moves in long, powerful strokes that drag against every sensitive place inside me, setting my body alight. The edge of pain fades completely, replaced by a spreading, molten pleasure that builds higher with every thrust.

My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him down for a kiss that is all teeth and tongues and desperate need. He groans into my mouth, thrusting harder now, faster, his control slipping away.

“Mine,” he snarls against my lips, pounding into me so deep that I feel him in my bones. “You will always be mine.”

“Yes,” I sob, dizzy with sensation, nails raking down his broad, sweat-slick back. “I’m yours. Forever.”

His movements become rough, frantic, as if he can’t get close enough, can’t merge our bodies deeply enough.

The pleasure builds and builds, crashing over me in waves that steal my breath. I break apart around him, crying out, my walls clenching tight, milking him as he follows me over the edge.

“Drusilla,” he roars as he drives deep one last time and spills inside me with a groan that echoes through my soul.

We shatter together, tangled and shaking, bound by a love so powerful it could tear the world apart.

When the tremors ease, he collapses against me, burying his face in my hair, his breath ragged.

I hold him, heart thundering, overwhelmed by how close we are, by how, even after all these centuries, Rapha is still my home .

He slides down my body, resting his head on my breasts and pressing his ear to my racing heart.

“Never leave me again,” he whispers brokenly, and I feel the splash of his tear between my breasts.

“Never,” I promise vehemently, stroking my fingers through his hair. “You’re mine, too.”



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Rapha

“What is that?”

The words leave my mouth like a snarl before I’ve even processed them.

Drusilla looks up from her plate, startled. “What is what?”

We’re in the garden, surrounded by blooms she’s coaxed into thriving, the air thick with the scent of herbs and lavender. It’s supposed to be peaceful here. I built this for her. I built this for us.

After the way I touched her just hours ago, how she trembled for me, opened to me, I should feel whole . Sated. Content.

But something ugly twists in my chest, a wrongness rising in my blood like smoke from an unseen fire. This fury, this tightness in my jaw and fists... it isn’t natural. It feels like a foreign thing, like something has taken up residence inside me, whispering grievances I don’t remember collecting.

I rise, pacing toward the fluttering white linens pinned to a makeshift line between two trees.

“This,” I snap, yanking one end of the cloth like it’s betrayed me. “Why are these out here? Why aren’t you using the dryer in the house?”

She blinks at me, confused. “Because I prefer it this way. You know that.”

“But you don’t have to do these things anymore,” I grind out, the words coming faster, harsher.

“That’s the entire point, Drusilla. You don’t have to scrub or stitch or hang clothes in the wind like some peasant girl.

I gave you everything. Machines that can do this in half the time.

You could spend your hours reading, learning, creating, resting . ”

Her brows pull tight. “I like doing this. It centers me. And no, I don’t want your machines. I’ve told you that?—”

“You’re being silly, ” I bark, cutting across her. My hand tightens on the sheet as I rip it off the line and storm toward the house.

She’s behind me instantly. “Put those back, Rapha!”

Her voice is sharp now, filled with anger. Something about her defiance snaps something loose in me.

I whirl on her, the linen clenched in my fist, my breath coming too fast. “No.”

My voice is deeper than it should be. Rougher. Not mine. Not just mine.

She flinches but doesn’t back down. “You’re overreacting.”

Heat floods my veins. It’s not lust. It’s not hunger. It’s rage. A fire I can’t explain, can’t put out. A beast with my face and her name in its mouth.

I should feel peace after touching her. I should feel calm in her presence. But this fury

coils through me like poison, something not entirely me . Something planted. Something fed.

“I don’t understand,” I say, but it comes out as a growl. “You act like I haven’t sacrificed everything for you. You think I didn’t bleed for you, suffer for you, kill for you?”

Her eyes flash with hurt and fury. “I didn’t ask for any of that, Rapha. I didn’t ask to be resurrected, or dragged through centuries, or trapped in this house with a demon who doesn’t even remember how to be human. ”

I stagger back like she’s driven a blade between my ribs.

She keeps coming. “You’re acting like every man who’s tried to control me. My father. The husband he picked for me. The men who said they loved me while putting me in cages. You swore you’d never become them.”

Her words gut me.

I open my mouth to speak, to apologize , but something cold slithers up my spine. That familiar pull.

Lucifer.

A soul.

My fists clench involuntarily. My breath shudders. Not now. Please, not now.

But the call won’t be ignored.

“We’ll settle this later,” I bite out. I can’t even meet her eyes.

And then I'm gone.

The Below swallows me.

The rage still claws at my insides, growing, growing, growing.

Even as I tear another soul from the body of a dying miser in a gold-threaded bed, I can still hear her voice, telling me I'm losing myself. That I'm becoming what she feared.

And the worst part?

She's right.

I didn't notice it at first. Not when I started making trades without hesitation. Not when the lines blurred between necessity and indulgence.

But now... I do.

Drusilla's words echo in my skull like a curse: You swore you'd never become them.

I pace the obsidian hall, waiting for the next soul. The walls pulse faintly with bloodlight—veins of damned energy that feed the place like a living organism. My fists won't unclench. I can still feel the linen in my hand, torn from the line like a trophy of my madness.

I didn't just lose my temper. I lost control.

A succubus enters the room, eyes my expression warily, and wisely leaves. I must look like death incarnate. No. Worse. I feel worse.

The next soul is delivered to me like an offering.

I sit through the entire meeting, listening to a man in an overpriced suit ask me to destroy a father of four who dared to outpace him in their cutthroat little tech war. I wait for the usual rush, the sick, soaring high that comes with feeding Greed into the world like rot into a wound.

It comes. Of course it comes.

A dark thrill grips me as I seal the deal. The man signs, and power surges into me like bloodlust. I almost moan. Not from pleasure. From addiction.

That trade should end my night.

But I keep going.

I stay in the Below for days, trading, reaping, corrupting. Making deals not because I need to, but because I want to. I hit my quota within hours, but something deeper has awakened, something I can't quiet. The more souls I claim, the darker I become and the less I care.

I blink out of the room to the Veiled Market—the shadowy marketplace that exists on the boundary between worlds. A crossroads between the mortal realm and the Below, where demons, fae, witches, cursed souls, and desperate mortals go to trade secrets, souls, magic, and forbidden goods .

Evening light dims the lantern-glow into gold-drenched shadows. All around me, fae and demons barter for cursed trinkets and dangerous promises. I must look particularly wretched as I pass a flock of winged fairies because they flit away from me in terror, hissing warnings.

I almost curse them to a realm where monsters eat fairy wings for breakfast. Almost. But I sense another soul to collect. A nun, of all people.

She's waiting by a shadowed stall, her eyes darting as if afraid someone might see her. When she spots me, her fear wars with greed. Greed wins. It always does.

Her lips tremble as she sinks to her knees. Not for prayer. "I want Allison gone," she says, fingers trembling as they twist the silver cross around her neck. "She's spreading lies... Says I don't belong in my position."

My grin is too wide, too sharp. "She's right, though, isn't she, Mary Grace?" The way she cringes made my teeth itch with pleasure.

"I just want what's best for my community," she lies.

"Of course you do, deary."

The words taste like sulfur on my tongue. I sound like him. And yet... it thrills me.

I handed her the tools—the blood-dagger, the parchment, the black quill. She doesn't hesitate. Another name, another soul.

I continue through the market, high on power, my skin buzzing with it. I've exceeded my quota by months, and still I hunt more.

Until something snags.

Not outside me. Inside.

A gap. A hollow. Something I've forgotten.

Her.

Drusilla.

My footsteps falter, and for the first time in days—weeks?—the rush ebbs. Panic slithers in to take its place. I can't remember the last time I saw her. Touched her. Two weeks ago? Three? My pulse kicks hard, dread scratching at the back of my throat like claws on stone.

I turn sharply, ready to blink to the manor I built for her, only to collide with a presence far colder.

Lucifer.

He stands in front of me, wearing a grin too wide for his face.

“What have you done?” I growl, refusing to bow. I never bow to him. I never will .

“Oh, nothing dramatic,” he purrs, circling me like a predator in velvet. “You’re doing brilliantly, Rapha. Better than Mammon, honestly. He fell apart the moment he fell in love with Priscilla.”

“Penelope,” I correct, though Gods know why I bother.

Lucifer waves a dismissive hand. “But you, Rapha? You’ve embraced your purpose.” He bats his lashes, coy and cruel. “You’ve almost forgotten about her.”

His words burn worse than holy fire.

“I haven’t?—”

“Oh?” He tilts his head. “Then why haven’t you visited her? Held her? Touched her?” A cruel smile blooms. “You were going to ruin her. You wanted to. But now... you crave the ruin itself. She’s just a memory, isn’t she?”

A figure materializes behind him, and I stagger.

Cassian.

Her father.

The man who drove a stake through her heart.

“What did you do?” My question is a snarl.

Lucifer giggles, waving a lazy hand. “He had such a tragic little story, didn’t he? I figured we’d let him tell it himself. Maybe she wasn’t the innocent you made her out to be?”

He snaps his fingers, and we’re instantly transported to a decadent villa overlooking the sea. The pool glows with soft magic. Lucifer drapes himself across a sun lounger like a serpent sunning itself.

Cassian steps into the light, his armor ancient, his face hard and haggard, but it’s his aura that makes me flinch. He isn’t human anymore. He’s a revenant, reborn with cursed magic and infernal hunger.

“She betrayed our bloodline,” Cassian spits. “Laid with a vampire. Became a creature of darkness. I cleansed her.”

“She loved me,” I growl.



“She shamed us!” he bellows. “She died a disgrace!”

I lunge for him, teeth bared.

Lucifer flicks a hand, and I slam into the marble tiles. “Ah-ah. Not yet,” he says, almost bored. “We’re not done playing.”

He flicks his wrist again, and I’m yanked to my knees like a puppet with cut strings. The tiles grind into my bones. My power thrums inside me, burning to be unleashed, but I can’t move. Not yet.

“Now, now,” Lucifer purrs, toying with a blackened grape from a silver bowl beside him. “Let’s not make this about old grudges, Rapha. This is a test. A bit of sport. Your precious little beauty is still tucked away in that lovely manor you made for her. So charming. So vulnerable. ”

My stomach clenches. My pulse surges.

“What are you saying?” I snarl.

Cassian steps forward, the weight of his presence like a rot spreading through the air. “She’s mine to reclaim. You stole her. Defiled her. I’m taking back what was promised.”

“You have no claim on her,” I snarl. “She chose her life. She chose me. ”

Lucifer smiles wide enough to show his black-stained gums. “And now she gets to choose again. Or not. Depends how quickly you get there.”

My magic surges, but still I can’t move. I feel Drusilla. She’s close... but veiled. Something’s muffling the bond.

“She’s not defenseless,” I grit out.

“Oh, I’m counting on that,” Lucifer croons. “I know you warded the manor with magic to protect her. She’s bound to the manor now, did you know? The longer she stays, the more the magic becomes a part of her. Sweet little thing might even surprise Daddy.”

His voice hardens, losing its lazy cadence. “But let’s be honest, Rapha. You’ve been too busy bathing in mortal corruption to notice the bond fraying. And now? You’ve waited too long.”

I roar, fighting his hold with everything I am, sparks of flame crackling along my arms.

Lucifer smiles. “You’d better hurry if you want to save your precious Drusilla.”

He lifts his thumb and middle finger. Snaps.

Cassian vanishes.

The spell breaks.

I stagger to my feet, but I feel it in my bones.

Cassian’s already there.

I try to blink to the manor. To her.

Nothing.

Lucifer's laughter echoes in my skull as I sprint through the streets of Screaming

Woods, terror mounting. I burst through the manor's front door, calling her name.

“Drusilla!”

No answer.

I search every room, every door, even the ones sealed by ancient magic. She's gone.

When I finally stumble into the back garden, the sight before me stops me cold.

A message, carved into the stone wall in massive, deliberate strokes.

Fuit numquam tuum ut.

She was never yours to keep.

I drop to my knees, breath stolen from my lungs.

The truth settles in like ash on my tongue.

Lucifer didn't just allow Cassian to take her.

He made me forget her . No, I did that all on my own.

Then I hear her scream...

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Drusilla

I'm in one of the manor's hidden rooms, tucked behind a door only visible in certain light, when I hear a crash from downstairs.

It echoes like a war drum through the walls of this place Rapha built for me, and for a heartbeat, I don't move.

This room has become my sanctuary since he left—a small, golden-lit nook lined with puzzle boxes, cracked leather-bound books, and a velvet chaise I now consider mine.

I've spent entire afternoons here, coaxing a thousand fractured pieces into something whole, while the silence stretched too long between heartbeats.

The last few weeks have been a blur of ache and waiting. But not complete isolation.

When it all became too heavy, when I couldn't stop seeing the monster Rapha was becoming or dreaming of my father's cold voice, I told someone.

ToldAlice , who didn't blink. ToldGordy, who offered tea stronger than sin and a comforting silence that felt like safety.

I even confessed toVerityandGideon, their concern quiet but real. Verity wanted to curse Lucifer herself.

She also made me come to her baby shower.

At first, I said no. The idea of smiling through cake and ribbon games while my insides were knotted with grief seemed impossible. But Verity—glowing and fiercely kind—handed me a handwritten invitation sealed with gold wax and said, “I want you there, Drusilla. You’re one of us now.”

And so I went.

There were enchanted cupcakes and spellbound onesies and far too many stories about gorgon pregnancies that made me nearly faint. But there was also laughter. Real laughter. The kind that bubbled up unexpectedly and left my cheeks aching.

Somehow, their friendship has taken root in the spaces Rapha has left behind. And I’ve clung to it gratefully, fiercely. But even now, even with their comfort, my chest still aches with the not-knowing.

“Rapha?” I call, hope ringing in my voice as I hear movement again.

No answer.

I rise from the floor, brushing puzzle dust from my lap, my heart beating harder now. “Rapha?” I say again, voice sharper.

He’s back. He has to be.

I step into the hall, the manor stretching around me in shadowed silence, and peer down the staircase.

That’s when I see him.

The figure climbing the stairs is a tall, wrapped in ancient armor stitched together with magic and rot. It’s not Rapha.

My heart stutters.

My blood goes cold.

It's him .

He moves like a phantom wrapped in a creeping black mist that coils around his decaying form. His skin is gray and cracked like old marble. And his eyes—oh, Gods—are the eyes I've tried to forget.

“Father.”

He stops, lips curling into a sneer. “You will come with me, daughter.” His voice is wrong, like something dead speaking through dry leaves. “You were always weak. But I will restore your purpose. You are a stain, but I will cleanse our bloodline of your sin.”

Terror clutches my spine like a claw.

I turn and run, not only from him, but from what he used to make me feel. The shame. The silence. The belief that I was broken for wanting freedom.

The manor's magic stirs under my feet.

Rapha said the house was built from old stone, warded with shadow spells and protection runes. I sensed the energy but never called on it. Until now.

As I flee through the hall, I whisper to the house, to whatever magic guards its doors. Help me.

A corridor shifts. A door appears where there wasn't one before. I duck inside just as

my father's monstrous hand swipes at my back.

The room shifts into a dense jungle, another pocket of magic buried in the manor's twisted design. My bare feet pound across sticks and moss as I duck beneath vines and branches, heart hammering.

Another door emerges ahead. I take it, slamming into the kitchen next. I grab the first weapon I see, a long boning knife, and keep moving.

Passing through a Japanese garden, I dive behind a pagoda, sucking in shallow breaths. I press my hand to the stone, trying to quiet the sob rising in my throat.

Rapha... I scream for him in my mind, calling across whatever bond still connects us.

I feel the tether quiver, but something blocks it. Something dark.

I can't reach him.

Working on some unknown instinct, I gather what magic I can from the shadows, pressing my hands to the ground, whispering in the Old Tongue I don't remember learning. It answers. I feel it, ancient and electric, twining through my fingers like silk.

But I don't know how to wield it. Not yet.

A noise. The rustle of a bush. He's close.

Then everything happens at once.

His hand, cold and dry, closes around my throat, yanking me from hiding.

“Found you,” he hisses. “You think this place can protect you? I built stronger prisons than this for rebellious daughters.”

My scream is raw and desperate... and the magic erupts .

A blast of blue-white lightning explodes from my hand, flinging him backward into a stone wall.

Rapha bursts through a shimmer in the air the moment my father hits the ground.

He looks terrified. Furious.

“Drusilla!”

He reaches for me as Cassian rises, his bones cracking as magic pulses around him like a second skin.

“You filthy demon,” Cassian snarls, launching at Rapha.

They collide, a blur of violence and rage. Cassian’s hands close around Rapha’s throat, but Rapha tears free, slamming a fist into Cassian’s jaw with a thud like stone on stone.

I raise my hands again, summoning that same electricity, this time choosing it. I release it in a wave. Cassian stumbles. Rapha kicks him into the stone wall, and I hear the unmistakable snap of bone.

But even broken, my father grins grotesquely. “You will never be free of me. I will return. Lucifer has promised it. Your soul is mine by blood, and blood can be bound.  
”



A portal opens behind him, and he vanishes.

My legs give out, and I collapse.

Rapha is beside me in an instant, holding me, whispering my name.

“He still has control,” I whisper. “Not with chains or spells, but with fear. I froze when I saw him. I became that terrified girl again. But I can’t be her anymore. I won’t be.”

Rapha cups my face, brushing hair from my cheek. “You won’t be. Lucifer’s games have gone too far this time.”

But something in his voice falters.

And I know he’s not sure Lucifer can be reasoned with anymore.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Rapha

I almost lost her.

The thought circles my head in an endless loop. And the worst part? I barely noticed she was slipping from me until Lucifer threw it in my face.

I could blame him. I want to blame him. His sick little games, the way he puppets the dead and dances on the ruins of what we once were. But the truth is, the darkness didn't take me by force. I let it in.

I became greed .

The hunger crawls up my throat again. Not for blood. Not for food. Not even for her, though the echo of her moaning my name still lingers.

No, this is worse.

This hunger is slick and insidious. It tastes like power, like punishment, like the thrill of soul-trading and the lie that I'm in control .

What I should feel right now is a sense of peace. The slow, aching love of what it means to be hers and that she's safe. I should feel reconnected.

But the gnawing need still rakes at me.

I take her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. Her brow furrows, lips parting to

speak, but then I'm kissing her mouth, soft and slow. She melts against me in the space of a breath, her arms winding around my neck.

I scoop her into my lap and carry her to the bedroom.

The moonlight spills through the tall windows as I lay her down, worshiping every inch of skin I once feared I'd never touch again.

I undress her slowly, reverently, brushing my knuckles along her collarbone, my lips tracing the curve of her throat. She shivers beneath my hands, beneath my mouth. Her breath catches, her eyes searching mine.

“Rapha...” Her voice is soft but strained. “We need to talk. About Cassian. About what’s happening to you.”

I press my lips to hers before she can say more, swallowing the rising worry in her tone. “Words can wait,” I murmur. “Let me show you what you are to me. What you still are. What you’ll always be.”

She shivers beneath me, eyes locked to mine, and I see the question there: Do you still see me? Still want me?

I answer with my body.

The moment my mouth finds the tender peak of her breast, her body arches into mine, her fingers digging into my back.

I kiss down her sternum, over her belly, easing her thighs apart as her breath grows ragged. She tries to speak again, but I silence her with the drag of my tongue along the heat of her, slow and deep, my hands anchoring her hips.

She gasps, her head falling back, one arm flung across her forehead as she begins to tremble.

I stay there, tasting her, worshipping her with every stroke of my mouth.

I drink down the sounds she makes, the broken moans, the way she clutches my hair as if she'll fall without me holding her together.

Her thighs tighten around my head. Her breath catches.

"Raph—" she chokes, but the rest of my name is lost in a cry as she falls apart beneath my tongue.

She's still shivering when I kiss my way back up her body, licking the taste of her from my lips. Her eyes are wide, dazed, but she pulls me down into a kiss that's more desperate now, wanton and raw.

I ease into her slowly, tender from the start, but it's different now, deeper, heavier, needier.

She gasps. I still.

"It's okay," she whispers, pulling me closer. "I want all of you."

I hold her tight as I rock into her, grounding myself in her warmth, her breath, the way her body wraps around mine like she was made to hold me together.

She gasps my name again as I bury myself in her, letting her feel the full weight of me. Of everything I can't say.

We find our rhythm together, her hips rising to meet mine, our breath tangled as I

move inside her.

I cradle her face, kiss her lips, her neck, her shoulder.

I tell her without words that she's still the center of everything good inside me, that even as the darkness gnaws at my soul, she's the only light I'll ever chase.

She comes again with a cry, her body pulsing around mine, and the sensation unravels me completely. I let go, spilling into her with a groan, my body shaking from more than release.

It's surrender.

We collapse into each other, sweat-slick and breathless. Her hands stroke my back, soothing, grounding, even as I feel the ache of everything I've done press in again like a bruise beneath my skin.

But for now, there's only her.

Her scent.

Her heartbeat.

The echo of her name still burning in my throat.

She curls against my chest, her fingers tracing idle shapes along my ribs, her breath still uneven from what we just shared. I think she's drifting, her body heavy with release, but after a long silence, her voice emerges.

"You've changed." The moonlight paints her face in soft silver.

Her eyes are steady, but they hold a flicker of fear.

Not of me, but of what might be happening to me.

“Not just the horns or the fire or whatever dark silk your voice is made of now. Something deeper. When you came back tonight, you didn’t even want to talk. You wanted to consume.”

I don’t deny it. I can’t.

“I almost lost you,” I say, my voice thick. “I wasn’t thinking straight. All I could feel was the hunger... and the rage.”

Her hand moves to my cheek. “Rapha, what’s happening to you?”

I shut my eyes. “Reaping souls for Lucifer is changing me. The need for souls has replaced the blood addiction from when I was a vampire, only a thousand times stronger. It’s in every part of me now.

And all the while, Lucifer continues to play his games.

He brought your father back. Sent him to the manor.

Gave him a head start. And held me back. ”

She stiffens against me. “What?”

“He’s trying to pull me apart. Testing what’s left of me. Seeing how much I’ll sacrifice before I snap. And I nearly did, Dru. I left you here alone while I—” I heave a breath, guilt battering me.

She sits up, pulling the sheets with her, and I feel the shift in her. The warmth of our bodies fades between us, replaced by something colder. Sharper.

“What was the point of bringing me back if you keep leaving?” she asks quietly, but her voice holds an edge I’ve never heard from her before. “If I’m only going to lose you piece by piece?”

“Drusilla—”

“No.” She shakes her head. “You left me here alone for weeks while you slipped further and further into whatever this is. I kept telling myself you’d come back to me. That I’d wake up and the man I loved would be here, whole again.”

I sit up too, throat tight. “I didn’t mean to leave you alone. I thought?—”

“That I couldn’t handle it?” Her eyes flash. “That I’m fragile? That I’m still the girl who needed rescuing under an olive tree?”

I look at her, at the wild light in her eyes, and it hits me.

She’s furious .

“You’re not alone anymore, Rapha,” she says, softer now, but no less intense. “You don’t have to bear this burden by yourself. I’m not helpless. I don’t need to be protected from the truth. I need to be your partner. Let me fight for you. Let me stand beside you .”

The words cut through me like a blade made of love and fury and desperate, stubborn hope.

I want to argue. To warn her away from what I’ve become. But she’s already proven

she won't flinch. She faced her father's revenant alone. She wielded the manor's magic like a weapon. And she's still here, naked in every way, her soul laid bare in front of me.

"You're right," I whisper. "You've been fighting this whole time. And I've been running. From you. From what I'm becoming. From everything."

She softens slightly, reaching out to take my hand, our fingers threading together. "Then stop running. Let me help you find your way back."

I squeeze her hand. "I'll try."

"Not good enough," she says, raising an eyebrow. "There is no trying . There is only doing ."

I almost laugh at her bossy tone, but the emotion in my throat is too heavy to get past.

"I will," I say. And I mean it.

I lie down again and tug her close, needing her to ground me.

She's quiet for a long time before she finally asks, "What about what I did? Rapha? How did I do that? How was I able to use the magic in this place?"

"You called it," I murmur. "The manor... I built it for you. It responded because it's bonded to you now. It will always answer if you're in danger within its walls."

She blinks, silent.

"You saved yourself," I say. "You didn't need me to fight Cassian. You found your strength. The manor's magic didn't just let you use it. It obeyed you."



“I don’t want it if it means becoming like him,” she whispers. “My father... he called me a stain. Said he would cleanse our bloodline of my sin.”

“He won’t touch you again,” I swear. “Lucifer can twist every rule he wants, but I’ll burn this entire plane to ash before I let that revenant get near you again.”

Her eyes fill, but she presses her lips to my chest. “Don’t let my father or Lucifer take you from me, Rapha. Please. You’re still in there. I know it.”

I wrap my arms around her, breathing her in like I need her scent to keep me tethered. “I don’t know how much of me is left,” I admit, “but what remains is yours.”

She presses her cheek to my heart, listening to the strange rhythm that no longer belongs to the living.

“I’ll fight for you,” she whispers. “For both of us.”

Only then does her breath slow and her eyes finally fall closed.

And I’m left holding the most dangerous thing in all the worlds: a reason to hope.

I stroke her hair and try not to think as she sleeps, curled into me, her breath soft against my skin. But my mind is already racing.

Because the itch, the greed, is still there.

I slip from bed and pace the room. I’m fraying at the edges. Man to vampire to demon to nothing. I press my forehead to the cool wall and exhale a breath I can’t hold on to.

Lucifer.

I need to speak to him.

The world rips open around me, and the manor vanishes. I land on the obsidian tiles of Glutton Hall, where Lucifer looms on his throne above me.

“Well, well,” he drawls. “Look who’s crawled back. You know, I don’t appreciate you dropping in like this without an invitation.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

“You’ve gone too far,” I growl, ignoring him. “Bringing back Cassian? You crossed the line, Lucifer.”

He tilts his head, amused. “Ah, but you never told me you had a line.”

My fists clench. “He staked her. He killed her.”

“Yes,” Lucifer smiles. “And yet, here we are. I gave him a head start. You should be thanking me for the dramatic tension.”

“I should rip your fucking throat out.”

“You can try,” he says lightly. “But let’s not forget that I am an all-powerful fallen angel. Besides, what would that make you, Rapha? The demon of wrath? The demon of revenge?”

I sneer. “Don’t act like you didn’t plan this. You knew I was losing myself.”

He shrugs. “Of course. I wanted to see what you’d do when you realized you’re just like every soul you’ve harvested. A hypocrite. A pawn. You just won’t let her go, will you? Even if it’s destroying you.”

“Your stupid games are destroying me, Lucifer. Not Drusilla. I’d give my life for her, and if that’s what it takes, then so be it. I wanted to spend my days with her, but if all I get out of this forsaken bargain is for her to live the life she deserved, then so be it.”

“Oh, you don’t have to give up your life for her, Rapha. You simply have to embrace

what you are becoming or lose what you love the most.” Lucifer replies as if it’s that simple.

“You know if I give in to this entirely, I will destroy her.”

“But isn’t that part of the fun, Rapha? Will you destroy her? Will you destroy yourself? Who will lose? In the end, it doesn’t matter. I still get to watch the show.” He claps his hands gleefully. “So many twists and turns. It’s better than Love Island.”

I hate that he knows my weakness, that he knows he’s won, has always known he would win. How could I have been so stupid? I went in blindly, something I learned eons ago not to do. But I was desperate when I made that bargain with him, nearly insane with my need to bring Drusilla back.

Lucifer stretches out luxuriously on the throne. “Come now, darling. We both know why you’re here. You want someone to save you.”

For a heartbeat, I say nothing. I breathe—or try to. Every inhale feels like ash scraped over broken glass.

Because he’s not wrong.

That’s the worst part. Somewhere in the pit of me, beneath the rage and fire, I do want someone to pull me back. To claw me out of the rot before it becomes all I am. But not him. Never him.

“I’ll save myself,” I say tightly, voice low and shaking with restraint. “Or I’ll burn trying. And if I fall... I’ll drag you with me.”

Lucifer’s grin widens like it’s all a game. “As delicious as your threats are, Rapha, I fell a long time ago.”

I can't take the smirk, the scent of sulfur, the sound of my soul unraveling.

I blink out of Glutton Hall before I lose control, reappearing at the edge of Whispering Hollow in Fable Forest, the town neighboring Screaming Woods. The witches here don't deal in dreams or pity. They deal in blood, truth, and consequence.

It's past midnight, and the forest is hushed but alive.

The branches whisper secrets in a language only the damned can hear.

The trees here are older than memory, gnarled and silver-barked, heavy with moss that glows faintly green in the dark.

The air hums with latent power, the kind that can twist fate if you're foolish enough to ask.

Nestled at the heart of it all, partially hidden behind thick brambles and swaying ivy, stands the witches' house.

It's crooked, not in the way a cottage sags with age, but like it was always meant to defy symmetry and rules.

The stones shimmer faintly with embedded runes.

The chimney leaks a thin curl of lavender smoke.

Mushrooms cluster along the base, glowing softly in unnatural hues of blue, violet, and a sickly gold.

Wind chimes made of bone and crystal clink gently in the breeze. I see no lights in the windows, but the air around the house pulses like it's watching me.

I knock on the heavy oak door. The ivy covering it shifts as it creaks open.

A woman with dark braids and silver eyes peers out. "Rapha. Come in. Quietly."

I don't ask how she knows me. She's a witch, after all.

Inside, five more witches gather around a worn table. One raises an eyebrow. "What do you want?"

"I need help." I hate the rasp in my voice. "I made a bargain with Lucifer."

Silence.

"And?" another witch with a deeply-lined face and snowy-white hair prompts.

"I used to be a vampire. Now I'm... this. I'm greed. And I need to know how to stop the hunger before I lose the last of what I am."

She studies me. "We can't save you, Rapha. But we can show you what's left." She gestures to a tall mirror framed in gnarled oak and woven roots. "Look."

I step forward. My reflection stares back.

At first, it's just me, my horns, eyes rimmed in red, a mouth that smiles too little. Then the aura bleeds in.

Black.

The color of a void. Of consumption.

But at the crown of my head between the horns, a sliver of sickly green pulses faintly.

“The last trace of your human soul,” the white-haired witch says quietly. “You are nearly gone.”

I swallow hard. “Can it be saved?”

“One way only. No more trades. No more reaping. The next soul you touch will finish the job.”

My stomach drops.

That rush. That surge of ecstasy, of invincibility, is a part of me now.

But Drusilla is everything .

If I fall, I take her with me.

“Are you willing to lose her?” the witch asks.

I stare at my reflection. The demon stares back, already pulling at me to trade another soul. “I don’t know.”

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Drusilla

I wake up alone.

The space beside me is still warm, the white bed linens rumped and tangled around my legs. But the room is quiet, too quiet. My fingertips graze the sheets where Rapha curled around me just hours ago, his mouth on my skin, his body claiming mine with a hunger that felt both desperate and reverent.

Now, there's only absence.

The echo of silence, and the ache of something half-promised but already fading.

I lie still for a long moment, remembering the way he kissed me, worshipped me. The way he held me afterward, like I was the only tether keeping him from unraveling.

And now he's gone.

Again.

Shame and anger prickles under my skin, sharp and unwelcome. I roll out of bed, shower quickly, and dress without thinking, pulling on jeans and a soft sweater. I braid my hair to give my hands something to do. The dread in my stomach only thickens as I head into town.

The Spellbound Shelf is quiet when I push open the door. The air is thick with incense and old paper, and the enchanted chimes over the door tinkle a lazy welcome.



Alice looks up from behind the counter, her sharp blue eyes narrowing as she sees my face.

“Drusilla,” she says carefully. “You look tired.”

I smile tightly. “I need your help.”

She frowns, and from the shadows near the poetry section, Gordy rises like smoke, his beanie twitching faintly, alive with the snakes coiled inside.

“What are you planning?” he asks.

I tell them everything that happened last night, about Cassian and my newfound magic and waking to find Rapha gone. “So...I need to go to the Below,” I explain. “I need to find Lucifer.”

Alice drops the ancient text she was holding with a thud. Gordy’s brows shoot up.

“Absolutely not,” Alice says flatly.

“I’m not asking for permission,” I reply, steadying my voice even as my heart pounds. “I need to talk to him. Rapha’s slipping away, and Lucifer is the one pulling the strings.”

Alice circles the counter slowly, like she’s debating whether to hug me or slap me. “Do you even understand what you’re walking into? The Below isn’t hellfire and brimstone anymore. It’s temptation. It’s cruelty dressed in silk. If Rapha’s down there, it means he’s already losing the fight.”

“I know.” My voice trembles despite myself. “But I can’t stand here and do nothing.”

Alice shakes her head hard. “No. No way. This isn’t some love story where you kiss a monster and he turns back into a prince.

This is Lucifer. He doesn’t make bargains, he makes ruins.

You go down there, and you’re playing his game on his board.

You’re just one more toy for him to twist.” Her voice cracks at the edges, the cool detachment giving way to something rawer.

“You don’t come back the same—if you come back at all. ”

For a moment, I falter.

Then Gordy steps forward, his green eyes softening as he looks at me. “We need to help her, Alice.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s asking.”

“She knows exactly what she’s asking,” he says gently. “And I know what it feels like to fight for someone everyone else thinks is lost.”

Alice’s jaw clenches. “That was different.”

“Was it?” Gordy murmurs. “You were stone for weeks. I tried everything to find the curse that could undo it. Everyone told me it was pointless. That you were gone. That I should let you go. Everyone except Verity and Gideon.”

Alice closes her eyes and breathes slowly.

“But even if Verity and Gideon hadn’t stepped in to help, I would never have stopped

fighting for you, Alice,” Gordy continues.

“Because I knew who you were. Even when you couldn’t speak, couldn’t move, I knew who you were and what you meant to me.

” He turns to me. “Just as Drusilla knows who Rapha is.”

Alice’s lips part, then press together again.

She and Gordy exchange a look, one of those silent conversations that happen between people bound by love, magic, and trust. She exhales a shuddering breath and shakes her head.

“Even if we wanted to help you, we wouldn’t know how. We don’t have access to the Below.”

“Um. Gordy looks sheepish as he rubs the back of his neck. “That’s...not exactly true.”

Alice turns to him sharply. “What do you mean?”

He winces. “You remember all those different spells I tried to bring you back?”

She narrows her eyes.

Gordy chuckles nervously. “Right, well, I may have cracked something open. Just a little rift. I thought I closed it. Mostly.”

“You what ?” Alice’s voice pitches higher, her hands flying to her hips. “You opened a rift to the Below and didn’t think that was worth mentioning ?”

“It wasn’t a rift rift , ” he insists. “More like a magical paper cut.”

“A paper cut that bleeds sin and hellfire?”

“I fixed it! I think.” He glances at me, then back at Alice. “But maybe it’s still... faintly there. A residual echo. If we coax it open, she might be able to slip through.”

“We’re not dragging Dru into the Below through some cursed trap door you left in our bookstore, Gordy. We don’t even know if it’s stable.”

“But I have to go,” I say quietly. “I’m not afraid.”

She stares at me, wounded and fierce. “You should be.”

“Okay, I’m terrified,” I admit. “But Rapha’s down there. And he’s being pulled apart piece by piece. If I can get to him, if I can remind him who he is, what we mean to each other, I have to try. Please.”

Alice’s eyes brim with conflict.

Finally, she exhales through her nose and turns to Gordy. “Where?”

“The old reading cellar,” he says. “Behind the Romance stacks.”

“Of course it’s behind Romance,” Alice mutters.

She disappears behind a curtain and returns with a small silver charm on a black cord. “Protection spell. It won’t stop Lucifer, but it’ll keep his little distractions from getting their claws too deep.”

She places it around my neck and presses two fingers to my forehead, whispering a

word I don't catch. "That's for clarity. Hold onto your truth down there."

I nod, holding back tears. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," she mutters. "Just come back whole."

Gordy leads us through the cramped back hallway behind the Romance section. The floorboards creak beneath our feet, and the scent of old paper and honey-wax candles lingers in the air.

"I don't even want to know what's leaking out of this rift thingy," Alice mutters as we descend a narrow spiral staircase. "And if anything has nested down here, demon, ghost, or goblin, I'm blaming you, Gordy."

He offers a sheepish shrug. "I was panicking. You were stone."

"And this was your solution?"

"I was desperate."

She huffs but says nothing more.

We reach the cellar floor, and the air shifts.

It's colder here, denser somehow, like the pressure of the earth has a pulse.

Old reading chairs are draped with sheets.

Forgotten tomes line the dusty shelves. A cracked mirror leans against one wall, its surface fogged with age.

And in the far corner, beneath a threadbare tapestry of a weeping willow, the floor glows faintly like moonlight caught in a puddle.

Alice stops, her mouth a grim line. “There.”

I step closer. The shimmer pulses as I near it, and the space beneath the tapestry begins to ripple. Gordy nudges the fabric aside, revealing a shallow depression in the stone floor about the size of a doorway. The air above it quivers, invisible and yet not.

“It doesn’t always show itself,” he says softly. “But when you want something badly enough...”

“It listens,” Alice finishes, her voice brittle.

I stare at the shimmer, heart pounding.

Gordy hands me a folded scrap of paper. “Names,” he explains. “Call them in order if you get in trouble. They owe me. Probably.”

I smile, barely.

Alice hesitates, then wraps her arms around me fiercely. “Don’t let him forget you.”

“I won’t,” I breathe.

Then I step forward.

The shimmer parts like water, cool and biting as it clings to my skin. I feel it slide over me, inside me, as if tasting my fears and memories. I don’t look back.

The Below welcomes me with velvet-dark shadows and perfume-thick air. Heat rises from the cobblestones beneath my boots, and above me, lanterns glow with unnatural fire. Laughter echoes from the alleyways, low and hungry. A sign swings on black iron hinges nearby:

Welcome to the Below. All sins accepted. No absolution required.

I make my way through twisting backstreets, pausing to ask for Lucifer's whereabouts in whispers. Most beings here don't look twice at me, but the ones who do? Their eyes are sharp. Hungry.

Eventually, I find the crimson door carved with sigils that pulse softly under my fingertips. Beyond is the speakeasy-style club in the Below that Lucifer apparently likes to frequent. I push it open and step inside.

The heat hits me first, humid and perfumed. Then the sound. Low music. Moans. Whispers. Laughter. Shadows pulse against the walls like breathing things.

At the center of the club, I stop. A woman is sprawled on a table, moaning with abandon as a demon laps between her thighs, his tongue unnaturally long, working in practiced circles that leave her clawing at the air. Her pleasure is theatrical, but not false.

I blush, my thighs clenching involuntarily. I tear my gaze away. I didn't come for this.

Lucifer waits for me in the back booth like he's been expecting me, sprawled like a prince of excess, his velvet yellow suit immaculate, his grin indulgent.

"Drusilla," he purrs. "Rapha's queen, in the flesh. I wondered when you'd seek me out. Found the little doorway in the witch and gorgon's bookshop, did you?"

“I’m not here for your games,” I snap, taking the seat across from him.

“Of course you are,” he replies with a wink. “You just don’t realize it yet.”

I lean forward, gripping the table. “Let him go.”

His laugh is low and musical. “Darling, Rapha traded himself willingly. He knew the price.”

“And yet you couldn’t resist bringing back my father,” I say coldly.

His expression sharpens. “Cassian? Yes. Delicious little twist, isn’t it? Will he take you? Will Rapha lose control and destroy you?” He licks his bottom lip. “You mortals do love your tragedy.”

I clench my fists. “There has to be a way.”

Lucifer’s smile turns sly as if he’s been waiting for me to ask. “Well, there is one. You could bind his soul to yours.”

I still. “What?”

“A soul tether. Very old magic. It would keep him close. Grounded to you. But it would limit him. Take away his full autonomy.”

My stomach flips. “You mean take his free will.”

He shrugs. “Tomato, tomahto. It’s not a cage. It’s a leash. With just enough slack to feel like freedom.”

I shake my head. “No. I won’t chain him. If he fights for me, it has to be his choice.”



“You mortals. Always so dramatic.” Lucifer sighs. “Well, all you have to do is call my name if you change your mind. But don’t take too long. I get bored easily.”

His attention drifts toward the table again, where the demon’s tongue is now drawing gasps loud enough to echo. He snaps his fingers, and I’m back at the manor.

Everything is quiet as I slip inside. I shut the door behind me and let out a breath.

And then...pain. A sharp crack to my head. My knees buckle. My vision blurs.

“My daughter,” Cassian rasps from behind me. “I told you I would return.”

Then everything goes dark.

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Rapha

There's always been a thread between Drusilla and me. Invisible. Indestructible. Even during the centuries she was lost to me, it tugged at something primal, something ancient and sacred in my chest. A bond deeper than blood and older than death.

Tonight, that thread tightens.

It pulls hard and sudden, sharp as a blade to the sternum, resonating with fear. Not mine. Hers.

A flash of icy panic drenches me, consumes me. I stagger, my hand falling away from the soul I was about to trade. My breath lodges in my throat. My claws flex involuntarily.

Drusilla.

She's not afraid. She's terrified. It pours through the bond like a scream with no sound.

Panic surges in my blood like wildfire as I push away from the stall, sending the goblin vendor tumbling. I shove past wraiths, witches, and a startled kelpie wrangler. The Veiled Market erupts in curses and glowing sigils behind me, but I don't stop.

I lock onto that thread, the beat of her terror, and follow it like a trail of blood.

It leads me to the edge of Screaming Woods, but this place no longer resembles the

rest of the magical town.

Black trees claw the sky, rising before me like a warning.

The wind howls like a dirge. Dead branches crunch beneath my boots.

Charred roots wrap around the stones. Nothing grows here. No bird sings. The air tastes of ruin.

What fuck has happened here? The question hangs unanswered because I don't stop. I can't.

I don't feel the cold or the rot.

I feel her .

She's not far.

I move faster, talons extended, teeth bared—not for intimidation, but because my body doesn't know how to be anything but ready . Ready to kill. Ready to die. Ready to tear through anything that stands between me and the woman screaming through the bond.

A thin shimmer of old magic slashes across my vision like a veil half-lifted.

I step through it and stumble into what might have once been sacred ground.

What's left is a ruin. The bones of a temple.

Cracked columns half-swallowed by the earth.

Vines strangling archways. Statues with faces worn smooth by time and fury.

But power still vibrates within. Twisting. Brewing. Humming like a live wire stretched too tight.

Drusilla is here, bound at the center of a ritual circle. Silver cords bite into her wrists, and her head is slumped forward, her ebony hair a dark curtain hiding her face.

And standing beyond the chalked runes is Cassian.

The man who gave her life.

The man who stole it.

The man I killed once physically and a hundred thousand ways in my imagination.

Pale light pulses around him. Not firelight. Not spelllight.

Bloodlight. Thick and alive. A signature of a corrupted ritual. The kind that consumes, not empowers. The kind meant to kill the soul before the body.

His armor is tarnished and cracked, weeping shadows. His face is a cruel mask of triumph, but his eyes gleam with something deeper than madness.

Conviction.

He lifts a blade etched with blood runes. It hums with sacrificial energy.

“You’re just in time,” he says, voice full of glee. “You can watch her soul burn.”

“Step away from her,” I snarl, moving forward.

“Once, I was a general. A man of God. Ruler of an Empire. I raised her to continue that line.” He turns his eyes on me, hollow with fury.

“And then you infected her. You stole her from me. Tainted her. She became something unclean. Something lesser. I wept for her soul. I spent centuries in Purgatory, and I felt the ripple, heard the whispers when she was brought back. And then Lucifer offered me the chance to finish what I had begun. To cleanse what remained.”

“No, Lucifer brought you back to level the playing field. He was bored and thought it would amuse him,” I spit, circling the runes. “You’re just another piece on his board, Cassian.”

Cassian's mouth curls into a cruel smile. “Perhaps. But tonight, I carve away the rot.”

His eyes flash toward Drusilla, still bound in silver cords, her head bowed, her body trembling against the bloodlight pressing in on her.

“She was meant to carry my legacy. The Church. The Empire. Order. ” His voice rises, reverent and wrathful. “And instead, she defied me. Embraced darkness. Gave herself to you. ”

I take a step closer, careful not to breach the edge of the circle. Blood magic like this can explode with the wrong pressure. “You didn’t want a daughter,” I say coldly. “You wanted a puppet. Someone to inherit your power without questioning your rules.”

Cassian’s voice turns venomous. “She was mine. My creation. My heir. Until you twisted her.”

“No,” I growl, voice low. “She was never yours. You controlled her, beat her, but in

the end, she chose herself.”

Cassian lifts the blade higher. “Then she dies by her own choice,” he says almost peacefully. “Burned clean. Forgotten. And I will save her soul by destroying it.”

The words are so twisted with self-righteousness that they almost sound merciful. Almost.

“You’re not saving anything,” I snarl. “You’re just trying to erase the part of her you couldn’t control.”

A flicker of something crosses his face—rage, maybe. Or the shame of a man who’s gone too far to recognize himself.

I take another step, claws bared. “You don’t cleanse things by burning them alive.”

“You do,” he says flatly, “when they’re already damned.”

He looks at Drusilla like a relic left to rot. Not a daughter. A failure. A mark he’s desperate to erase.

“I will burn her soul until there is nothing left,” he snarls. “No ghost. No whisper. Nothing for you to cling to. I will salt the earth where she once stood. I will make her never have been. ” The sword pulses red in his hands. “And when she’s gone, my legacy will be pure again.”

“No!” I lunge at him as he swings the sword toward Drusilla.

I don’t even see it coming. Cassian turns at the last second and drives his sword through my chest. The blood runes etched into the steel do their job as the blade carves straight through my ribs.

One second, I'm moving, talons ready to rip him to shreds, and the next, fire lances through my chest, hot and final.

I hit the ground hard. Cold stone. Cold blood. Mine. I can't move. My limbs are ice. My vision swims.

Drusilla's scream reaches me from a distance, like she's calling to me through water or from another world.

Darkness creeps in.

Is this how it ends? Not in redemption. Not in rage. But in failure?

I palm the locket that still hangs around my neck. A symbol of our enduring love. I forgot for a little while, lured by the addiction of reaping souls for Lucifer. Irony how everything is so incredibly clear when you're on the brink of death.

"You thought your love would save you?" Cassian snarls, his eyes gleaming with madness as he looks at Drusilla. "But I will end you so thoroughly that no god, no demon, no curse will ever bring you back."

He chants in a language so old, even time has forgotten it. Drusilla screams, and her body arches. Pain rips through her as the ritual pulls at her soul, trying to unmake her. On and on, her scream echoes through the night air, becoming hoarse and broken until it finally becomes a whimper and dies.

Her head hangs forward, her ebony hair concealing her features.

Silence reigns.

What's left of my soul writhes in agony. I sense it. The absence of her heartbeat.

Dying now seems like a blessing because I've lost her again. My Drusilla. My butterfly.

Then...something pulses. Something ancient. Familiar.

A shudder ripples through the temple.

Her stalled heart... starts again. I feel it.

A beat. Another. And another.

Drusilla lifts her head.

And smiles.

Her incisors elongate into fangs. Her eyes are alive, the pupils circled with gold.

The silver cords restraining her burn away like mist. Runes crack. The bloodlight magic recoils like a beast struck blind. Power roars outward—not Cassian's, but hers. Raw, wild, and righteous.

Then, my beautiful, powerful butterfly breaks the circle.

The world shifts. The temple trembles. And in a breathless blink, we're not in Screaming Woods anymore. We're somewhere older. Somewhere sacred.

I blink against the light, and the ruin around us begins to flicker. Columns become whole again. The scorched altar is now gleaming black marble. Torches flicker in sconces that haven't existed in centuries. Moonlight spills through a high, arched opening where no roof should be.



A tether between past and present has opened, woven from her soul and mine.

The cursed clearing in Screaming Woods is still here—burned stone, twisted trees, rot beneath our feet—but it's overlaid with memory, with magic, with the ghost of the bond we forged all those centuries ago.

The temple as it once was, the night we planned to escape.

The place where Cassian killed her has become the place where she rises.

Cassian stumbles back. “No,” he breathes. “That’s not... What have you... What are you doing?”

Drusilla turns toward him, radiant and terrible. Her hair whips in the rising wind. Power rolls off her in waves. “Sorry to disappoint you, Father,” she says, snarling the word, “but you didn’t destroy me.” Her eyes flick to mine. “You brought me home.”

And I suddenly understand.

Bloodlight magic. Cassian summoned bloodlight magic to power the ritual. But instead of unraveling her, the ritual has reignited the vampiric part of her that once tasted forever and wanted it. It knows her blood. It remembers the first bond she ever chose.

Cassian used it, thinking he could erase her soul, burn her from existence, and cleanse his legacy. But the magic was born here in this place of blood vows and eternal bonds.

The pain in my chest blurs as my eyes lock on her. My Drusilla.

But she’s not mine right now.

She's herself. Glorious. Terrible. Eternal.

Drusilla steps forward, the ritual circle crumbling behind her. Cassian screams and lashes out with the blade, but she catches his arm mid-swing, her strength amplified. She breaks his arm with a crack that echoes through both centuries. His sword clangs to the ground as he falls to his knees.

Drusilla retrieves the sword, pressing the tip to his chest.

Cassian's eyes spew hate as he looks up at his daughter.

Hers are molten with retribution.

"You built your legacy on blood and fear," she says, her voice strong. "But I am not the reason for the end of your legacy. You are. And I'm the reckoning."

Cassian flinches as she drives the blade forward... but the temple answers her before she can finish the job.

The runes at their feet ignite in searing gold. The altar beneath Cassian cracks wide open as wind shrieks through the ruin, stirring the ghostly veil of Roman grandeur. The past demands balance.

Cassian howls as the magic turns inward, dragging him down, down, into the altar stones, into the earth, into time. He reaches for Drusilla, but she doesn't move. She simply watches as he's swallowed whole, and nothing of him remains.

No blood. No ashes.

Only silence and peace.

Drusilla exhales shakily and turns to me. She falls to her knees beside me, hands already on my chest, trying to stem the flow of blood.

With a monumental effort, I raise a hand to cup her cheek. “So proud of you...my beautiful butterfly.”

“No,” she breathes. “No. Not again. Not like this.”

I’m slipping. My body is growing numb.

“I won’t lose you,” she says, shaking. “You hear me, Rapha?” She leans in, her forehead pressing against mine. “Don’t give up, Rapha. Love is more than a moment for us. It’s every moment. It’s centuries of faith and the belief that you and I are meant to be.”

Her words echo through me, but they’re distant like stars.

I want to answer her. Gods, I want to stay. But the pain is fading. And that’s the problem.

The burn in my chest dulls. My limbs feel heavy, untethered. Light dances at the corners of my vision, not golden or holy, but flat and grey, like the last edge of dusk before night devours the sky.

“You hear me, Rapha?” she whispers, voice cracking. “Don’t you leave me. Fight for us, my love.”

I try to smile. Try to speak. My mouth moves, but no sound comes. I want to tell her I choose her. I’ll always choose her. That I’d die for her a thousand times without hesitation.

But all I can do is curl my fingers around the locket I'm still holding and hope she sees everything I can't say in my eyes.

"Rapha," she begs, sobbing. "Please."

The world slips, and our bond unspools into silence.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Drusilla

Rapha's body is heavy in my arms. His warmth is fading. His eyes stare at nothing, lips parted as if he had one more thing to say.

"No," I whisper. "No, no, no..."

Pain rips through me with a cruel, patient precision.

He died in my arms. For me.

I press my lips to his brow, then to his mouth. He doesn't kiss me back.

"You promised me forever," I whisper, my voice breaking.

My heart aches so violently I want to tear it from my chest, to stop feeling, stop remembering the way he touched me like I was sacred.

But he's gone.

I rock forward, cradling him tighter, like I can wrap my body around time and undo it.

But any power I had here has dissipated. I'm a vampire again, but I have no power to bring back the man I love.

Unless...

Rapha said the magic in the manor he built for me would answer me. Can I use it to bring him back?

The idea barely registers when a new presence coils into the space. The shadows stretch and twist as smoke slinks in around the altar.

And from the center of it steps Lucifer, resplendent in the most garish ensemble I've ever seen.

A ruby-red velvet suit, embroidered with glittering gold serpents that writhe subtly when he moves.

His shirt is an explosion of ruffled black silk, open halfway to his navel.

His boots—snakeskin, obviously—shine like he has someone on his demonic payroll whose only job is to buff them between dramatic entrances.

And atop his immaculately groomed head? A top hat. Tilted enough to be both rakish and ridiculous.

He smiles as if stepping onto a stage instead of into the ruins of my broken heart. His gaze settles on Rapha's body. "Well. This is dramatic. I half-expected doves."

I don't rise. "Go away."

Lucifer sighs, tilting his head. "That's the thanks I get? After coming all this way?"

"You're too late," I snarl.

"Darling, I'm never late. I arrive precisely when the desperation peaks."

“Proud of your pathetic little games, are you?” I ask bitterly. “Come to gloat?”

“A little,” he admits without remorse. “Your grief summoned me. Your angst was too delicious to resist.” He circles Rapha’s corpse with idle interest. “He really went for the grand gesture, didn’t he? Tragic. Did he whisper your name with his dying breath? Did he curse me? Did he weep?”

“He loved,” I snap. “Something you’ll never understand.”

Lucifer gasps, pressing a hand to his ridiculous ruffled chest. “You wound me, Drusilla.” He tilts his head, smiling with mock sympathy. “Have you reconsidered my offer? It’s not too late.”

“The soul tether?” I glare at him. “I told you no.”

“Yes, yes. ‘If he fights for me, it has to be his choice.’ ” He mimics my voice. “Very romantic.” He steps closer, voice dropping. “But he made his choice, didn’t he, Drusilla? He died for you. Gave what little was left of his tattered soul. That should count for something.”

My throat tightens. I can’t breathe.

He lifts a hand, palm glowing faintly with red magic.

“He’ll live. He’ll breathe. He’ll love you.

” He pauses. “But he’ll never again be just himself.

A piece of him will always echo you. Your bond will be unbreakable.

Binding. And yes,” he says as if anticipating my question, “he’ll be aware of it.

That's part of the fun. So, what is your decision?

You don't have much time left. He's growing colder by the minute. "

I stare at him, something cold uncoiling in my chest. "You're asking me to do this without his consent."

Lucifer shrugs. "I'm offering you permanence. Most people would jump at the chance to resurrect their one true love. Rapha did. Don't you think you should return the favor?"

I glower at him. "You don't understand love."

"No," he says, eyes suddenly flat and ancient. "But I understand bargains."

Silence cloaks us like a curtain.

I look down at Rapha. At the locket still clutched in his hand. At the man who sacrificed himself so I could live. Who trusted me to make the right call. Even now.

"No," I say quietly.

Lucifer blinks, almost startled. "What was that?"

"I said no." I lift my chin. "Not that way. Never that way. The deals, the bargains, the pacts, whatever you want to call them, end here." I brush my fingers over Rapha's cheek. His skin is so pale. "He gave up everything for me. I'm not turning that into a leash."

"As you wish." His sigh is long and theatrical. "Honestly, you principled types always make me feel a little nauseous, like I've swallowed holy water by accident."



Lucifer turns to walk away, then pauses and glances back with theatrical casualness. “Still, you really should be proud.”

I frown. “Of what?”

“He did it himself, Drusilla. As he died. Without me. No bargains, no sigils, no blood price. Just raw, inconvenient love.”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand.”

Lucifer arches a brow. “Look at your beloved.”

My gaze flies to Rapha, and my mouth drops open. His horns have vanished. The talons tipping his fingers... gone.

“He came for me,” I whisper. “He chose love over addiction. He chose me. That’s what freed him.”

“Indeed.” Lucifer spins on his heel, hands behind his back like a ringmaster preparing his final flourish.

“Rapha’s devoted sacrifice unraveled the pact that bound him to me, and the bloodlight magic revived your vampiric sides.

” He sighs heavily. “Shame. I swear it’s harder to keep a greed demon than a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts. ”

My heart kicks against my ribs. “Are you saying he’s free? That he’s just Rapha now?”

Lucifer shrugs. “If there’s ever been such a thing. But yes. Mortal-ish. Vampire-ish.

All those nice soft hyphens. Bound to you by love, not a contract. Free will fully intact. Boring as hell.”

“Oh, Gods,” I murmur, hardly able to believe it.

Then a thought occurs to me. I narrow my eyes.

“Wait. You knew he was free when you offered me the soul tether. You would’ve brought him back, but not for me. Not for us. This was all part of your sick little game. You brought back Cassian to manipulate me. You thought I’d bargain for Rapha’s life just as he did for mine.”

Lucifer grins, slow and cold. “Of course I did, my sweet, deluded Drusilla. Need I remind you that I’m the Devil?

Manipulation is my middle name. Did you honestly think I brought your father back, brought you back, out of the goodness of my charred little heart?

No, darling. I thought I could twist your love for Rapha into something useful.

A shiny little chain I could tug when I got bored. ”

I glare. “Then why didn’t you?”

He sighs impatiently, like he’s explaining long division to a dog.

“Because while I cracked open the gate, it was his damn devotion that dragged your soul back into your bones. He gave you life again. It seems centuries of unrequited love is quite the magical accelerant. You were reborn through his love, not my dominion. And love , as it turns out, is wildly inconvenient to corrupt. I couldn’t tether you because you weren’t mine to bind. ”

“So in tethering Rapha to me, I would tether myself to you,” I state.

He gives a slow, mocking clap. “Exactly. But you resisted. You chose to let his sacrifice stand. You chose him. And he chose you. Honestly, I’m offended.”

Hysterical laughter bubbles up in my throat. “Oh, Gods, this is perfect.”

Lucifer’s eyes narrow, his grin fixed like it’s been stapled there under duress. “Careful, darling. I’m still the Prince of Darkness. Just because you slipped the leash doesn’t mean I won’t find new ways to meddle. I’m endlessly creative.”

“You’re petty,” I correct, wiping a tear of laughter from my cheek. “You lost, and you hate that it was because of love.”

“Yes, well, thanks to my beloved estranged father”—he casts his eyes heavenward—“true, unselfish love is messy, unpredictable, and incredibly hard to corrupt. I loathe it.”

“Get used to it,” I say, turning back to Rapha’s still form, my hand trembling as it brushes his hair from his brow. “Because this love? It’s not going anywhere.”

Something flickers in Lucifer’s eyes for only a second, but I recognize it. Envy.

“Disgusting,” he scoffs. “You two are insufferable.”

I pause, another question catching on the edge of my tongue.

“And Cassian?” I ask, voice low. “Is he dead?”

Lucifer’s grin sharpens, teeth gleaming like blades. “Oh, yes. Quite. No messy in between this time. No purgatory. No redemption arc.” He leans in, his purred words

laced with venom.

“He’s with me now. And I plan to spend the next few millennia finding increasingly creative ways to make him regret every moment of it.”

I shiver, not with fear but with certainty. Cassian is gone. Truly gone. And the Devil, for once, is telling the truth.

He flicks his wrist and begins to fade, his silhouette blurring into smoke and shadow. “Enjoy your nauseating reunion,” he calls over his shoulder. “But know this—love may have won today, but I never really lose. I simply pivot.”

I open my mouth to deliver a scathing reply, but he disappears in a shimmer of embers.

And then...

Rapha’s fingers twitch in my hand.

I freeze.

The world tilts.

My gaze flies to his face. Color rises beneath his skin like dawn bleeding back into a world I thought would never see light again. His cheeks flush with the faintest pink, the awful stillness melting into something warm.

His chest rises. A sharp, desperate inhale that drags him back from the edge of the abyss. His ribs expand. His lips part around a rasping breath that sounds more like a sob. His lashes flicker.

“Rapha?” I whisper, terrified to believe it.

A golden light pulses beneath the skin, faint and flickering, like an ember refusing to die.

The wound on his chest knits closed, muscle tightening beneath skin, torn flesh fusing with quiet, terrifying grace.

Blood clings to him still, but the source of it is sealing shut, healing slowly but surely.

His hand jerks again. Curls around mine.

His eyes open and lock onto mine, no longer red but the beautiful silver gray they were when we met.

“Drusilla,” he breathes.

I sob his name as I cradle his face in trembling hands. “You came back.”

He nods faintly, like it takes everything he has. “For you,” he rasps. “Always for you.”

Tears spill down my cheeks. I don’t bother wiping them away. I press my forehead to his, anchoring us both. His breath is shallow, but it’s real. Warm.

“You died,” I whisper.

“I remember.” His voice is rough, frayed at the edges. A shudder rolls through him. I slide my hand over his chest above the nearly sealed wound. His heartbeat flutters against my palm, growing stronger with each beat. My tears fall faster.

“I thought I lost you. I thought—” My throat closes. “You chose me. It was enough.”  
I lean in, my lips brushing his.

“No more running,” he vows, cupping the back of my neck. “No more bargains. No more dying. I choose you. Not power. Not eternity. Not even vengeance. Just you.”

We collapse into each other. Broken, rebuilt, reborn. The temple trembles around us, its purpose burned out, its curse undone.

But I don't look at it.

I look only at him.

The vampire I died for centuries ago.

The mortal-ish man I live for today.

The beautiful soul I'll love for all my tomorrows.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

Rapha

I never thought I'd be a brunch person.

And yet here I am, sitting under a vine-draped pergola behind the Spellbound Bookshelf, sipping coffee laced with enough cinnamon to make Lucifer twitch, while Verity snuggles a newborn on her lap.

Little Felix, with his moon-round cheeks and very suspicious eyes. Drusilla's been helping with the night feeds, and I've been carved into godfather duties like some sort of ancient vampire au pair. And somehow, I don't hate it.

Strange, the things you come to crave when you stop feeding on blood and souls.

Screaming Woods was supposed to be temporary.

A waystation. But it's sticky here. In the way honey clings to your fingers.

In the way family sneaks up on you when you're not looking. One day you're a soul-sucking demon, and the next, you're helping Gordy repaint the bookshop shutters because he says, "black absorbs too much mood."

He's not wrong. The gloom was starting to ferment.

Drusilla arrives late to brunch, per usual, glittering with magic and something that smells like a summer thunderstorm. Alice trails behind her, smug as a sprite on espresso.

“I’m so proud. She summoned a storm,” Alice announces, plopping down beside me and stealing the last scone. “With her feelings . It was very broody. Very Byronic.”

Drusilla kisses me like she didn’t just almost drown the western quadrant of town. Her lips are cold from spellwork, and her magic hums under her skin like champagne fizz.

“Apologies for the weather,” she murmurs. “I was feeling... poetic.”

“Your poetic phase nearly electrocuted Gordy and Alice’s cat.”

“She started it,” Dru says, with a pointed look at the tabby curled nearby. “She peed on my grimoire.”

Alice shrugs. “Hazards of witchcraft.”

We all fall into easy laughter, the kind that comes from surviving too much together.

I never thought I’d laugh again. I thought I’d spend eternity drowning in darkness. But here we are. I’m nobody’s demon now. Just Rapha. Kind-of-vampire. Reformed soul hoarder. Very much in love. Because Drusilla and I are stitched together by something older than hell and gentler than eternity.

So far, Lucifer has left us alone. Maybe even he knows that some resurrections don’t belong to him.

Drusilla’s magic is evolving faster than any of us predicted. Alice says it’s because she came back differently . Not through necromancy or deals, but through devotion. Love as a catalyst is apparently wildly unpredictable and extremely good for spellwork.



She still has fangs—adorable ones—but her powers are more elemental now. Emotion-based. Unstable in the best way. Gordy calls her a magical mood ring. I call her mine.

As for me? I've taken up consulting. Supernatural risk assessment. Soul trap avoidance. I charge in gold, favors, or rare teas. Screaming Woods has needs, and I happen to be very good at solving problems that involve fire, portals, and supernatural loopholes.

We have a house just past the edge of town. The manor was too big, too heavy with old shadows. So we built something smaller and brighter with a sunroom. Drusilla insisted. She says even the undead need light.

I asked her once if she missed her old life. She looked at me like I'd asked if she missed being stabbed.

“I have you,” she said simply. “What else could I possibly need?”

She might be right.

Except maybe... one more thing.

“Dru?” I murmur, as she leans against my shoulder, watching Felix drool on Gideon's shirt. “Do you think we'll ever...?”

Her head tilts, and her beautiful eyes find mine. “Have children?”

I nod.

She smiles, soft and wild and wicked. “I think the magic that made us came from love. And love creates.”

I stare at her, a flicker of awe blooming beneath my ribs. “So that’s a yes?”

“It’s a maybe with very good odds,” she teases. “We’ll just have to see what kind of miracle we can cook up.”

Drusilla

Rapha shuts the bedroom door behind him, his gaze burning into me. He watches me from the threshold. He’s still in his black button-down, sleeves rolled, shirt untucked, collar open just enough to expose the bite mark I left on his throat three nights ago.

Gods, I love him.

I tilt my head. “You’re staring again.”

He smiles, slow and wicked. “Can you blame me?”

“No. But you could come closer.” I stretch, deliberately arching my back, letting the gauzy slip I’m wearing ride up along my thighs. I see his jaw clench. Excellent.

His eyes rake over me like I’m the first star after an endless dusk. His lips part, and for a moment, he simply stares. Then, low and rough, “Come here.”

I cross to him slowly, hips swaying, letting the silence stretch and crackle. When I reach him, he grips my waist, spins me, and presses me against the cool wood of the door.

“I’ve been thinking about you all day.”

“Just thinking?” I tease.

“Imagining,” he murmurs, voice rough velvet against my ear. “Planning.”

My pulse stutters as his hand skims down my back and cups my ass. His palm is warm. Firm. Possessive. “And what exactly did you plan?”

“To worship you,” he growls. “Properly. Thoroughly. On every surface of this house, if necessary. I’ve been patient all day,” he murmurs against my neck, voice low and dangerous. “But now I need to feel you come apart.”

And then he’s kissing me like the world is ending. Like he’s starving. Like he needs to crawl inside my skin just to breathe. He tears the slip over my head, and the fabric falls like petals to the floor.

“You feel like lightning,” he rasps, kissing a trail down my throat. “Like summer storms and moonlight and hunger.”

His hands roam, reverent and greedy at once, and I melt into him, my fingers tangling in his hair. “Touch me, Rapha. I want to feel everything.”

He pauses, looks up. “Everything?”

My breath catches. “Everything.”

“Gods,” he whispers. “You’re unreal.”

“I’m yours,” I whisper back. “Isn’t that what you always say?”

He growls, eyes glowing faintly red, a glimmer of the demon he used to be. Not dangerous. Not to me. Just... unleashed. Just mine.

“Yes,” he says, his voice a promise and a prayer. “Mine.”

“Then take me,” I breathe, already aching.

His mouth crashes into mine again, hot and demanding, while his hands slide over my hips, my ass, my breasts, possessive and practiced, like he’s memorized every inch of me.

He has.

His fangs graze my bottom lip as he growls, “You remember what we talked about earlier?”

“Mmm,” I hum, grinding against the thigh he’s wedged between mine. “About children?”

He kisses down my neck, trailing heat and hunger. “You said love creates. So let’s make something. Right now. Fill you up, keep you full of me until the magic decides it’s time.”

I moan, head thudding back against the door, thighs already slick with need. “You think my womb’s a spell circle now?”

“I think it’s mine,” he snarls, dipping to suck one aching nipple into his mouth.

I whimper, wrapping my legs around him as he carries me to the bed. He tosses me onto the mattress, and I sprawl there, flushed and panting, while he strips out of his clothes, letting me watch.

His cock is thick and already hard, flushed dark and dripping at the tip.

“I want to taste you first,” he says, kneeling between my thighs and pulling them wide. “Need you to come on my tongue before I fuck a baby into you.”

“Rapha,” I gasp, but the rest of the sentence vanishes into a scream as his mouth descends.

He licks me like he’s starving, like my pussy is the only thing that will ever satisfy him. His tongue circles my clit, teasing, torturing, until he slides two fingers inside me and curls them just right.

“Oh, Gods, yes!”

“That’s it,” he murmurs, lips brushing my slick folds. “Come for me, Dru. Let me taste you while you think about me coming inside you, raw and deep.”

That does it. My vision whites out as my orgasm crashes over me, wild and sharp and endless. My magic bursts outward in a shimmering pulse, ruffling the curtains and lighting the candles.

He groans against me, like my pleasure alone feeds him. When I finally blink back into my body, he’s crawling over me, bracing himself on one arm as he guides his cock to my entrance.

“You ready?”

I reach for him, wrap my legs high around his hips. “I’ve been ready since you poured cinnamon in your coffee this morning and gave me that look.”

He pushes in with one smooth thrust, and we both cry out.

Gods, he’s thick. He stretches me so full that I forget how to breathe.

He holds still inside me, shaking. “You feel... Fuck. Dru.”

“Move,” I whisper.

He pulls back and thrusts into me—slow at first, but deep, grinding, hitting the spot that makes my toes curl. Each stroke is a promise. A spell. A mark.

My nails rake down his back, and I arch into him, lost to the rhythm. “Harder.”

He growls, shifting his angle and pounding into me until the bed shakes.

“I’m going to fill you up,” he pants against my mouth. “So deep, you’ll still be dripping when you walk tomorrow. And when you get pregnant, when your belly swells with our magic, you’ll know this was the night it happened.”

“Yes,” I cry, clawing at him, my body close to the edge again. “Do it, Rapha.”

He grabs my hips and thrusts faster, harder, until we’re both snarling and moaning and cursing. The pressure explodes, and I come with a sob, clenching around him so tightly that he roars and follows me over, spilling hot and deep inside me, pulsing with every wave.

His hand finds mine. Our fingers tangle.

“I love you,” he murmurs into my mouth

We collapse together, his weight anchoring me, grounding me.

I feel full. Claimed. Worshipped.

Alive.

After a few heartbeats, he murmurs against my temple, “You good?”

I nod, breathless. “You?”

He kisses my forehead. “Perfect. But... maybe we should try again in a bit. Just to be thorough.”

I laugh, wrapping my arms around him. “For science.”

“For magic,” he agrees.

I press my lips to his throat. “We’ll make something beautiful, won’t we?”

He strokes my hair. “We already have.”

We’ve been through hell and back for our happy ever after. The love between us is deeper than death.

And we’re just getting started.

Thank you for reading!

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

33 A.D., Roman Empire. Somewhere near what is now Southern Europe.

Rapha



*Source Creation Date: July 25, 2025, 12:33 pm*

One day, I'm going to blow this popsicle stand and get a real job.

Looking around at the luxurious, if slightly hellish, waiting room in Glutton Hall, I can't help but wish I'd made different choices in life. Ones that hadn't brought me straight to, well, Hell. In living color. Or rather, undead color, which could totally catch on as a home furnishing palette.