



# Hex Marks the Spot (Hex Is Where The Heart Is)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Welcome to Hex, Indiana...

Poe

As the king of the crossroads demons, I hold all our secrets, and they aren't all fun. I do my best to keep things running properly and modernize when I need to. But crossroads demons are slowly finding their truths, being released from duties, and I'm starting to flounder. Becoming the head of Hex, Indiana's leading council has helped, but is it enough when I'm used to ruling over thousands? I'll help anyone however I can, but what if I'm the one that needs it?

BB

I'm a bat shifter with the confidence of a piece of string. So, none. I have no family and I'm too scared to get close to anyone. The only reason I know about Hex, Indiana is because of an incident in a store where I panic shifted into a bat. Afterwards, a strange lady appeared and told me to go to Hex. I snuck in three months ago, but now I'm too afraid to do anything other than go to work. The one thing saving me is knowing I'm close to the demon I met as a teen. The one that said if I needed anything, to let him know. He's handsome, but I won't ask him for help. Just knowing he's around is enough, even if our first and only encounter lasted less than ten minutes.

When the pair meets again, Poe's world turns upside down and BB learns what it's like to have someone looking after him. What happens when a possessive demon falls head over heels in love with a sweet bat shifter?

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

BEAU

I nibble my bottom lip as I squint at my weather app. Storms. For three days.

Maybe I should call in, burrow into my bed or hide in the closet with the door shut and my sound canceling headphones and a towel stuffed under the door to keep all light out. Yes. I should definitely call in, but I know I won't.

It's not that I'll be in major trouble, but if I lose a shift, then I can't save or I might be short on rent. The thought of being short for rent makes my stomach slosh with anxiety. I don't think Mrs. Boots will mind me being a tiny bit late if I need to be, but I'd rather eat slugs.

Hex, Indiana has been a haven these last three months. I don't want to sully that by not being responsible, and going to work even if I'm scared shitless about the storms, is responsible.

Out in the human world, I mostly stayed in my bat form unless I wanted some kind of human luxury. I'd find lost money from the ground to buy little human treats to eat or dress myself in soft human clothes.

I glare at the weather app one last time before swiping to my homepage and shoving my phone into the pocket of my skinny jeans. I've known this storm system was coming, but not in enough time to ask for the days off. Randy—my manager—always has the schedule for Hex Grocer done for a month out.

I lean onto the sink countertop to take in the dark circles under my eyes. They look

even worse in the dim lighting. I haven't been sleeping.

Maybe the storms won't be so bad? My co-workers have assured me that most storms in Hex are mild, but their mild, and mine could be totally different.

I've weathered storms. Big ones, small ones, one rumble of thunder and it's over. I just really, really hate them because they remind me of the day my life changed forever. Oh, and they are terrifying.

I smooth my hand down the front of my uniform shirt. It's a red t-shirt with the Hex Grocer logo on the front, which is just a cornstalk and typography. Hex is known to be surrounded by corn. It's our protector and keeps normies out. Well, the magic keeps normies out; the corn is just a cover.

I swipe water through my unruly, boring brown hair. There's a dent at the top from where my headphones sit, but if I don't have them on when I'm human, everything is too loud for me. I adjust the headband a bit for comfort.

The storms shouldn't start for a few hours, so the walk to work should be fine. I shove my anxiety to the back of my head. Sometimes I can imagine I'm not a nervous wreck at least seventy percent of my awake time. I really won't have to worry about the storm until after my shift. While I'm clocked in and stocking shelves, I'm fine, nothing can get me inside Hex Grocer. At least that's what I'm going to tell myself for now.

I grab my sunglasses from the small shelf in the wall by the door and slide them on. My apartment stays dim so I don't have to wear the shades inside, but at the grocery store the lights are always bright and artificial and hurt my ridiculously sensitive eyes. Randy doesn't mind the accommodation. He says as long as it helps me get the job done, he's good with it.

Outside my apartment, the sky is dark and gloomy. The air smells like rain and I already want to rush back inside and call out. “I can do this,” I chant to myself as I lock up. “Everything is going to be?—”

“Hey BB!” Sparkle calls to me from the front door of the buttercup colored house as I practically jump out of my skin. I live in the basement apartment of the cat shifter family’s house. “Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you!” He’s wearing hot pink sparkly leggings and a white tunic that falls off one shoulder. His white cat ears twitch back and his tail sways as he joins me at my door. Sparkle pats me down. “You okay? You’re shaking. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It wasn’t you. I’m already riled up about the storms.”

“I love storms.” Sparkle spins on his toes with his arms out. I try to keep from curling in on myself, but I can’t help it and wrap my arms around my waist. Sparkle frowns. “You’re really afraid, aren’t you?” He drops a hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

“Yep. It’s sad, right? I’m twenty-four and still can’t—” I shake my head, hating that storms have me in such a choke hold.

“Hey, it’s okay, BB.” He leans in close to whisper, “I still hate the vacuum cleaner.” He giggles and loops his arm in mine. “Come on, I’ll escort you to work. Mom wants me to pick up a few things, anyway.”

“I’d like that.” I let out a breath and relax as much as possible. Before I moved into the Boots’s basement, I hadn’t had a friend in so long. Sparkle’s the best and over the last several months, he’s helped me come out of my shell just a little bit. Not a lot, but enough that I’m satisfied with my progress, even if it’s slow going.

“What plans do you have this weekend? Because Pike is giving me free rein to organize the other dancers. I want you to see my pole routine.” Sparkle bats his

ridiculously long lashes, each of which are dotted with what appears to be a jewel. He's always dolled up. Honestly, the man is beautiful, but not exactly my type.

"I dunno." Going out in public that's not Hex Grocer is always way too much for me.

"It's okay if you're not ready." He pats my hand and we walk in silence. Sparkle works at Flutter and Fangs, a bar run by an incubus and a Fae. He not only dances, but he teaches pole and bar tends. He says he'll do anything to keep him away from being home. While I'm the opposite and would rather stay in my cozy, happy place I made in the basement of his childhood home.

"One day, promise."

"Whenever you're ready, BB, I'll give you the best lap dance of your life."

That has me laughing. "I don't know that I'll ever be ready for that."

"You never know." His tail wiggles up my back, making me laugh again. "My specialty is pole dancing though, or I make a mean Sex On The Beach that makes everyone moan in ecstasy."

"I don't even know what that is."

"Oh, you sweet sheltered man. Come to F&F, let me teach you." More lash batting.

My cheeks heat and I shake my head. "Not yet."

"Okay." He boops my nose with his manicured finger and pulls me closer. His tail brushes my leg as we walk. I don't think it's intentional, it just sways, or maybe it has a mind of its own, like demon tails. "Have you been to Wick's bakery?"

I shake my head again. “Is it good?”

Sparkle skips a few steps in his excitement. “Oh em gee, it’s to die for. He has these amazing cherry tarts. And holy fuck, if you’ve never had one of his apple cinnamon muffins, you’re missing out.”

“I do like treats.” It might actually be an understatement.

Sparkle’s eyes light up. “That’s it! Your next adventure into the great wide world of Hex is Wick’s Bakery. Baby steps. Maybe you’re really not ready for F&F, but the bakery should be nice and slow paced if we time it right.” He lets me go and claps as he bounces in his sneakers.

The tiny bell on the top of the door of Hex Grocer smacks against the door as we walk in. Sparkle kept me from thinking too hard as we walked. He gives me a knowing smile and squeezes my arm before letting me go.

“Thanks, Sparkle.”

“Have an awesome day, BB!” He waves while I head to the back room to drop off my lunch in my locker. It’s just a sandwich and some chips, but now my mouth is watering for sweet treats from a bakery.

Maybe the next few days won’t be scary. Maybe I can get through the storms without an incident.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

POE

The thunder rattles the windows, and rain pours from the heavens, making this meeting extra annoying. People talk louder to be heard over the storm. The scent of popcorn permeates my senses as it always does during our Hex council meetings.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. I've made a mistake. Minor compared to other mistakes, but a mistake none the less. I've been voted in as the leader of the council since I have the most experience of being in charge. As the king of the crossroads demons, I understand their reasoning. But I should have declined.

I pride myself on my ability to listen and mediate when needed. But Hex, Indiana's leading council is insufferable. I know I should give them all some grace, and usually I have much more tolerance, but today irritation seeps into my pores and I'm ready to go home, kickback, and maybe watch a show or two.

"How about we wrap this up? I have an appointment in ten minutes with the crossroads council and can't be late." It's a lie. I'm the one in charge of the crossroads demons. No one else. But my fellow Hex leaders don't need to know that.

"Yes," Trixie, a born witch, says as she stretches. "My ass has gone numb and we're getting nowhere. We'll pick up next week."

Leo, the vampire, frowns. "Perhaps you're right. We can put the safety of Hex off for another week."

Silently, I groan. "We've been over this before. As long as the witches keep the

wards going, Hex is protected indefinitely.”

“But the wards are old,” Leo argues.

I rub my temple as I grind my teeth. “And strong because of the bloodlines. I’ve tested them myself. Added my own magic. There’s nothing to worry about.” Not a lie. I’m as paranoid as the rest of them about intruders into Hex, so I’m always testing and fortifying the wards.

Only people that know about Hex can enter properly and see the town as it is. Everyone else just sees corn field after corn field for miles on end. We do have a few suppliers from outside of Hex, but not many. None of them are what we call normies.

Gabe’s our latest newcomer and he’s been here for a few years now. He’s a sweet nephilim bartender that’s attached to the crossroads demon with his eyes set on my job as king. Unfortunately, Van will never have my job. No one will. No one can be king other than me. That’s a whole problem I have to figure out on my own.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. What now? “Excuse me, I need to take this.” My brows scrunch when I realize it’s the phone number to Hex Grocer. What the hell? “Poe speaking, this better be good.” Screeching comes from my ear piece and I wince as I pull it away. “Hello? I don’t have all day.” But I do. As soon as we wrap up this fucking meeting.

Someone clears their throat. “BB needs you to come pick him up. He’s freaking out in the dairy aisle.”

“Who the fuck is BB?”

“BB, you know? BB?”

“I have no idea...” Instead of continuing the conversation via phone, I teleport myself to the grocery store. The frazzled manager—Randy, he/him by the nametag—looks up at me. His wolf ears twitch with every screech between the claps of thunder.

“He’s over there.” Randy points to the far corner ceiling, where a small bat cries as it spins in its flight.

“What set him off?”

“Dunno.” Randy shrugs and shakes his head. “One minute he’s fine, stocking the dairy, then boom, he’s freaking out.”

Thunder rumbles through the store. “Did it start with the storm?” The forecast for Hex has been storms for the next three days.

“Ah, that’s it. Now, I remember something about him beings scared of storms, but I’ve never witnessed this before.” He waves up at the bat again.

“Where are his clothes?”

“Left ‘em where they fell.” Randy walks me to the dairy aisle where I find a pair of skinny jeans, pristine white sneakers, socks, and a blood red Hex Grocer t-shirt. I grab a reusable bag from the display shelf across from the dairy aisle and stuff the clothes inside.

“Has anyone tried to calm him down?”

“Don’t you think we tried that before calling the king of crossroads demons? How do you know little BB, anyway?”

“I don’t.”

Randy's face scrunches. "Then why does he have you down as his emergency contact?"

"No idea, but I plan to find out. How old is he?" If he's still scared of storms, then he's probably a teenager. Probably his first job and afraid to be away from the family tree during a storm.

"He's in his twenties."

"Seriously? "

Randy looks at a piece of paper. He squints at the print. "Yep, looks like about twenty-four if I did my math right."

"Twenty-four, and this is his reaction to a bit of thunder?" The poor boy must have some major trauma. "Is he scheduled to work the next few days?"

"Supposed to be."

"Reschedule him. He doesn't need to deal with this right now." I don't know why I know it, but I do. There's something deeper going on here and for some reason, I want to help.

"I'll see if someone else can take his shifts. They aren't gonna be happy about it."

"I'm happy to offer an incentive to anyone that helps out."

Randy runs a hand through his hair, making his wolf ear twitch again. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't. I offered. I'll give them triple what they'd normally earn during their

shift. Just get me the info of who I need to thank.”

“Yes, sir.” His tail wags and his face turns red.

“Good. Now, I need to figure out this mystery.” Without further discussion, I let my wings out. They’re huge, and will most definitely get in the way, but they’re what I have to work with right now. I fly to the ceiling, bringing the bag of clothes with me. BB still flaps around in the corner and I can’t tell if he’s disoriented or confused or just so terrified he can’t think straight. “Hi, BB. I’m Poe, but I think you know that.”

And that does not calm him one bit. Maybe it’s my blood-red eyes. Those can be unsettling to people. Or maybe the big rack of horns. Or just the fact I’m the king of crossroads demons. His little wings flap harder and he squeaks over and over. I drop and stride back to the manager. “What does BB stand for? Maybe if?—”

“Bat Boy.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” I pinch the bridge of my nose again. “Have you all been calling him BB and Bat Boy behind his back this?—”

“He filled it out as BB. I didn’t make that up.” Randy waves the emergency contact paper at me.

“And where did Bat Boy come from?”

Randy shrugs as he wipes at his brow. “Just a joke.” He throws up a hand. “He’s a bat. And pretty young.”

I growl and I’m sure my red eyes glow. I stare up at the little bat. He has to be exhausted by now. Instead of flying up to him. I leap, snagging him in my arms, and transport us both back to my house in the demon realm. Where I know it’s not

storming.

I clutch the tiny quivering bat in my arms when we land on the couch in my living room. Unfortunately, he's not calming. I've probably just scared him further by bringing him to an entirely different realm. Fuck.

I cling to him as he tries to get away. His little screeches and chirps ring in my ears and make my heart ache at the same time. Who hurt him? Why is he so terrified?

"Hey, hey. Take a few deep breaths for me, please. It's not storming here. See? Listen?" I give it a few heartbeats before shifting gears. I sigh and push to my feet. "Sorry, sweetheart. This might be harsh but..." I stroll to my ensuite bathroom and toss in the bag of clothes. "Do what you need to do to calm down. There aren't any windows in here and you can take a shower if you want. Whatever you need. But you can't come out until you've calmed the fuck down."

I toss the bat into the bathroom and wait.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

BEAU

W hat. Have. I. Done? I'm in the king of crossroads demons house . In the demon realm! No, no, no, no. I never should have put him down as my emergency contact, but he's the only person I could think of at the time. If I could do it all over, and maybe I should, I'd put down Sparkle, or maybe his mother, but not Poe.

My wings are so tired, my lungs burn, but my head won't stop spinning over and over. I screech like a banshee getting a feel for the bathroom with echolocation. It's huge, maybe even bigger than the entire Boots house. How big is Poe's place? Is it a palace?

I'm so disappointed in myself for panicking at the first sound of thunder. I thought I pushed my fear away hard enough, but when the shelves rattled, I knew the storm started and not even my headphones helped. I focused on the sound instead of the job and I started trembling and before I knew it, I was a bat. Just like that day three months ago in the human world.

I can't decide between hanging upside down from the shower rail or shifting to my human form. Hanging always comforts me, but at this point I'm no doubt an unwelcomed intruder in Poe's palace.

Slowly, I drop to the smooth tiled floor and flop to my back. I keep my eyes shut in the bright room and imagine myself as human. As I shift, my body slides across the floor. I'm a microbat, so my human size isn't very big either. I'm about the same height as Sparkle and he's short, other than the 'I'm seven feet tall' attitude he has.

I scramble to my feet, still keeping my eyes closed. Poe probably doesn't want my naked ass all over his clean floor. I shield my eyes and crack one open to find the light switch to turn off the overhead lights. I shiver in the dark. My heart pounds. Now I need to dress and face the music. Face Poe.

My skin already heats at the idea. With embarrassment, excitement, anxiety, I'm not sure, probably all the above.

I grab my jeans from the bag first. Thank goodness my underwear stayed tucked in my jeans so they weren't on display for anyone to see. I tug them on, then my shirt, socks, and shoes. But that's all that's inside the bag, not my sunglasses or my headphones.

Pacing the bathroom, I try to come up with a solution. There really isn't any other than asking for his help again. Poe's already gotten me away from the shop where it's storming. I should be calm.

"Take a few breaths," I say to myself as I press my hands to my heart to help center myself. I imagine roots growing from my waist, down my legs, my feet, and into the earth below Poe's palace. It's just a visualization, something I've been testing the waters on lately to see if the grounding meditation helps calm me.

I have no idea how long I stand in Poe's bathroom, basically imagining I'm a tree when there's a soft knock on the door.

"BB, are you okay in there?" Poe's voice is soft. "I'm concerned about you."

He's concerned about me? I dash to the door and crack it open just the tiniest amount so I don't blind myself with the light. Poe is still achingly gorgeous, like he was all those years ago. Those deep red eyes might bring terror to others, but to me, they only bring comfort. I want to run my fingers through his dark hair. He still has the

same concern etched across his face, but this time for a different reason. I don't dare to open the door wider, don't dare to let him look at me without my gear. Nine years ago, I was still a kid, but he left an impression that never went away.

I swallow and force myself to speak. "Sorry, I'm okay now. But... did you happen to see headphones and a pair of sunglasses when you grabbed my clothes? I can deal without both, but the lights are so bright and everything is usually so loud."

The room beyond him dims. "I did not, but let me go investigate. In the meantime, you're welcome to make yourself comfortable here. I've lowered the lights throughout the entire house. And don't get scared if an orange cat comes barreling at you, Creamsicle is harmless. And spoiled." He chuckles.

Before I can say anything, Poe disappears.

I take a deep breath and toe the door open. I have no idea what I expected Poe's house to smell like, but it wasn't jasmine. The scent always draws me in, but where is it coming from? I peek from the bathroom before stepping out and breathing deeper. A hint of rose and honeysuckle joins the scent. The marble floor spreads out before me to a huge bedroom.

My eyes go wide. This has to be his bedroom. A prrrumph comes from the huge bed pressed against the wall. An orange and white cat stretches and looks at me before murrrrphing .

"Creamsicle?" I whisper and inch closer. When I'm human, there's nothing to be afraid of when it comes to cats. But when I'm a bat, I have to be super careful. One time I got swatted by a house cat when I flew too close to it in search of coins.

Creamsicle hops from the bed and aims straight for me. I keep completely still, not wanting to startle the animal. They rub their head against me and I take that as a sign

they like me, which makes me preen and my shoulders shimmy a little. I squat to rub their soft little head. They're orange, with a white triangle right on their forehead. They purr as I continue to scratch.

"You're very sweet."

" Murrph . " They lift their head high and loop through my legs to trot out the bedroom door.

Of course, I follow the cat. Their tail swishes back and forth, and every few steps, they look back to make sure I'm following.

"I'm here." I don't want to be in the bedroom. That's way too intimate.

We pass door after door and go down a curved staircase until we're in a foyer. I shiver in the chilly air, but continue to follow the cat all the way into a ginormous kitchen. There are chrome appliances and one of those islands with the pots and pans rack above it. The oven looks like it could bake me if I curled up onto a cookie sheet.

I shiver at the thought.

Creamsicle headbutts my legs. " Merorr. " They look up and that's where I find a bag of cat treats. On top of the ridiculously tall chrome refrigerator.

"I can't reach that." At least not without climbing the counters, and that would just be rude.

" Merooooorrr. Meroooooor. Meroor. "

"Okay, okay, okay." I slide onto a barstool from the kitchen island. "But I can't climb on counters with shoes on." I untie my laces and set my shoes on the floor. The

marble is so clean I can see my reflection in it.

Creamsicle rubs their head on me again and again.

“I’m getting there, silly kitty.” Another few head scratches, then I drag a dining room chair over. Looking over my shoulder with each movement, I climb the counter. “We gotta be sneaky, okay? I don’t know when Poe’ll be back. He can teleport, you know.” I chuckle. “Of course you know he teleports.” Slowly, I push to my feet and the fridge is still tall, but at least I can reach the cat treats. Another look over my shoulder and I grab the bag.

Creamsicle merorrrrororsss from their spot on the marble floor.

“Oh, you naughty girl. You’ve known him for ten whole minutes and you already have him wrapped around your little claws, don’t you?”

I spin, clutching the treat bag, and slip off the counter. Instead of crashing to the floor when I overcorrect, I’m cradled in Poe’s strong arms with him staring at me with wide eyes.

“You okay?” He asks, rubbing a hand down my back.

I can’t speak. He’s too much. So handsome. Strong. Sweet. Kind. And I’m in his arms. Shit.

I squirm until he releases me gently back to my feet.

“Sorry. About that.” I wave to the countertop, still clutching the treat bag.

Creamsicle continues to demand her treats, and I look sheepishly up at Poe.

He gives me a soft smile as he takes the bag from my hands. “It’s okay, my sweet girl is very demanding and we do not deny her treats. Never ever.” He squats as he opens the bag and Creamsicle rushes over to him. I’m not sure if I should be surprised or not at this sweet side of the crossroads king. The one time I met Poe before, he was very nice, even denying me. He babbles baby talk at Creamsicle and it’s so endearing. I have to wonder if any of his crossroads subjects have ever seen this side of him.

When I look away from them, I find my sunglasses and headphones on the kitchen island. “Thank you for grabbing these for me.” I plop the headphones on my head and sigh. Kitty purring is sweet and all, but it’s loud to me. I loop the sunglasses on the collar of my t-shirt since it’s not too bright in the house.

Poe picks up Creamsicle and nuzzles her head with his cheek. “It’s no problem, but come talk with me.”

Anxiety rumbles in my tummy, but I follow him to a sitting room. I have no idea how many rooms this house palace has as I follow him through a door, down a hallway, and through another door to a big room. There are three couches facing a fireplace. It’s homey since none of the couches match in pattern or color. Everything in the room is a little mismatch, but it works.

“Have a seat.” Poe and Creamsicle sit on one couch.

I sit on the middle couch on the end closest to him. I hate this feeling, wondering what he’s going to say, what I should say. How do I explain... everything? He releases Creamsicle, and she hops over to my couch and settles in right next to me.

“Hello, pretty kitty,” I say as I sink my fingers into her soft fur, relaxing just a smidgen.

We all sit in silence other than Creamsicle's purring. She licks my hand and for a moment I startle. "She's not a Hellcat, right?" My hand doesn't burn, so I guess not.

"No, she's a normie." Poe gives his cat a fond smile. "A couple of years ago, I heard the saddest meow on the edges of Hex. When I went past the wards, I found the most pitiful looking kitten I'd ever seen. I had to help her. But Creamsicle isn't the reason I asked to chat."

"Right, right." My leg bounces and I rub at my knee.

"Why am I your emergency contact? We've never met."

"We have," I whisper.

He looks me over again. "I think I'd remember meeting you. You're..."

"A scaredy cat."

"Extraordinary. Bat shifters are ridiculously rare. And there's also the matter of you not having a permit to live here. In fact, you're not in any records. Who are you?"

I push to my feet, making Creamsicle glare at me. "I. I. I'm just me? Just Beau." Though I won't tell him my name is actually Baby Beau and that's where BB comes from, not Bat Boy. "Just a bat shifter."

"But how did you get in? And when did we meet? I'm sure I would have remembered a bat shifter."

I pace as I think of my answers. "I flew in three months ago."

"No, that's impossible. The wards should have kept you out unless—" Poe stands and

grabs my biceps. “Who told you about Hex?”

My heart pounds so hard. “A—A lady. She was really pretty. Had long dark hair and I swear she had an honest to goodness silver halo. She told me to find Hex, Indiana. Gave me directions and said that I’d be happier living my true self instead of a half-life. She said I should find her son, but then she disappeared before I could ask what his name was.”

Poe’s mouth falls open. “What happened that she showed herself to you?”

I cross my arms. “Why do you think something happened?”

He cocks a brow and waves at me. “Beau, which is much better than BB, you’re at my place because you had a panic attack during a storm. Gabe’s mother doesn’t just show up without cause, not even for him. What happened?”

I ball my hands and stare at the ceiling. It’s intricate, with patterns molded into it. I don’t want to tell him. It’s embarrassing.

“I can’t help if I don’t know all the details, Beau.”

“You didn’t help before.”

Poe looks me over again and shakes his head, but doesn’t say anything.

“Fine. Just like today, I had a panic attack during a storm. I was in a store and shifted into my bat. It was a whole scene. When I got myself out into the alley, she was there. I think she wiped their memories or something. Nothing ever showed up on the news or anything, as far as I know.”

Poe’s face softens, and he settles back into the couch. “Why are you terrified of

storms?”

“Nope, not happening. I don’t know you well enough.” My legs tremble. The telltale tingle of my shift starts and I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Beau, your heart is racing too fast. If you don’t take a few breaths and quiet your mind, you’re going to shift.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I ball my hands again. “Am I in trouble? Are you going to send me away?”

“No. I do need to register you, though.”

“Why?”

“Everyone in Hex gets registered, so we have the resources to take care of everyone. I had no idea we had a bat shifter in town. That requires extra precautions to keep you safe.”

Precautions? What precautions? “Why? I’ve been here three months and haven’t had one problem.”

“That’s all very well and good, but doesn’t negate the fact you are a highly prized shifter for someone like a necromancer or a witch with no morals. Where did you live before you came here?”

“In the human world. On the streets or in attics or wherever I found a little hidey hole as a bat.”

“That’s no way for anyone to live.”

“It’s your fault,” I snap back, not meaning to. I know it’s not even remotely his fault. If I weren’t such a coward, I could function better, but that’s not me. I’m scared of every little thing.

Poe goes pale. “I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about. I would have remembered you.”

It’s too much to remember the kind old man that took me in. Edward had been eighty-four when he found me human, naked, cold, afraid, half-starved in the woods. I was nine and stopped eating because I was so sad. But Edward helped. I was happy to have a kind person take me in. We had a good six years together. We took care of each other and I almost forgot about my life with my parents. Almost. Every storm brought the heartache and tragedy back.

“E—Edward summoned you nine years ago. I was there. I hadn’t realized he was dying until a few days later. I didn’t know humans died so young. He asked you to take me in and raise me in the creche, but you said I had to be a crossroads demon. You turned to me and said if I needed anything else, to let you know. So, like a fool, I put you down as my emergency contact for the first job I’ve ever had. I should have used Sparkle.”

His mouth opens and closes. I stumble back when his horns burst into violet flames. His eyes glow. What have I done?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

POE

My flames extinguish the moment I see them reflected in Beau's eyes.

"I remember that day." I squeeze my eyes shut, so I don't have to look at Beau's sweet face. He's definitely grown up, but had he not told me his past, I never would have realized this was the boy the strange human asked me to raise.

Edward, the old man, had stood on his knees looking up at me, begging for me to take the boy to the creche. He could have asked for immortality. Could have asked for any number of things, but he wanted me to raise the boy as a crossroads demon, which I couldn't do. The boy would have been the only one in the creche. All of my crossroads demons were grown or assigned by that time.

"Edward wasn't a born witch, was he? He didn't know about the sanctuary towns, otherwise he would have taken you to one."

Beau shakes his head. "I don't know what he was, if anything. After the death of his wife, I think he was as lost as I was. I still am."

"And why are you lost? Why aren't you living in a bat colony? There are so few of you, surely?—"

"I lived with my parents until—" He shakes his head as he falls back onto the couch. "I'm sorry. I can't."

I drop to my knees in front of him. "Beau, I know it hurts, but talk to me." It's always

better to talk things through. At least that's what I told my demons when I needed them to give me information. Our numbers have dwindled drastically, though. Aside from myself, there are only two crossroads demons left and I'm the only one that knows the truth of us all. All of our— my —secrets.

“I can't.”

I swipe his hair from his eyes. “I promise talking helps. Have you ever talked to anyone about whatever happened?”

“Edward.” His eyes drop and he fidgets. “Sparkle knows some.”

“Did Edward know you were a shifter?”

“Yes, and he encouraged me to be bat as much as possible when we were home.” There's a faraway look in Beau's eyes. “He told me all about his wife and how she was the one to teach him about shifters and witches and all of us. I think she was a born witch, but he talked about her about as much as I talked about my family.”

“Beau...” I take his hands. “Did something happen to your parents during a storm? Is that why?—”

He yanks his hands free and tries to pull away from me.

“It's okay to be afraid of storms. It's nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Really? Just one rumble of thunder has me shaking . I'm in my twenties! No one is afraid of storms in their twenties.”

“How did it happen?” I ask softly.

He sniffles and shakes his head. Tears stream down his face and he roughly wipes them away with the heels of his palms. “I was off on my own, flying around, playing, and I thought nothing of it when it started raining. I don’t like rain, so I headed back to the family tree. The rain got harder, and I had to land because I was too heavy. I kept going though, shifting to my human to walk home. But—” He shakes his head over and over. “I can’t. I can’t.”

“It’s okay, Beau. It’s okay.” I sit next to him on the couch and he wraps his arms around me to bury his face in my chest.

I rub his back as he cries. I’ve been in this position so many times with my crossroads demons when they were younger.

“I couldn’t help them. Couldn’t save them,” he mumbles against me. “The lightning hit the tree, and it burned. They were stuck because of a fallen branch and I couldn’t get to them.” He clings to my shirt. “I still hear the sounds they made, the tree, the storm. It’s my fault. Mine. If I could have gotten to them?—”

“No , Beau, it’s not your fault. You were a child. You did what you could.”

“I couldn’t do anything .”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” I want to kiss the top of his head, but refrain, keeping myself as professional as possible.

I let him sob until his shoulders stop shaking. My shirt is soaked, but I don’t care. If I can give Beau a small bit of comfort, it’s worth it. He sits and wipes his nose. “Sorry,” he whispers.

“Don’t be.”

His head falls to the back of the couch and he looks up at the ceiling. “Every time it storms, I tell myself I can get through it, just this once, but I never can. What if someone else gets hurt? What if I can’t help them? No one should have to go through that.”

“I agree. No one should. And I know it’s supposed to storm for several days in Hex.”

Beau stiffens at my words. “I know.”

“I’d like you to stay here until they blow over. It’ll give me time to get you properly registered with the town and find you accommodations more suited to you.”

“I can’t do that.” He pushes away. “I need to pay rent to Mrs. Boots. If I don’t work?—”

“Mrs. Boots didn’t ask for your permit? Or the grocery store?”

Beau shakes his head. “No one has ever asked me for a permit. I didn’t know I was supposed to have one. I flew in through a hole in the wards?—”

“There aren’t any holes in the wards, I check them myself.”

Beau gives me a look, the kind that says how did I get in then, and I shut my mouth.

“I flew in through a hole in the wards. I saw it with echolocation. Then I flew around to see if I liked Hex. I kinda maybe stole a shirt and pants from a clothesline. Found a job at the grocery, then overheard Mrs. Boots saying she needed extra income and was planning on renting the basement. I casually strolled around the corner and asked if they knew where I could find a place to live. She gave me the first month for the cost of doing two months of laundry for the house until I could get money from my job. It was a bargain. And Sparkle is my best friend.”

What feels like the thousandth time today, I pinch the bridge of my nose. I have a lot of investigating to do.

“What did I say?”

“Nothing, but I need to find out if we have more stowaways than just you. We really do want Hex to be a haven, but to make sure we have everything we need for the residents, we need to know they are here. Plus, now I need to know where the weak spots are and why they’re weak.”

“I just added to your workload.” Beau’s shoulders drop and he looks genuinely sad. “Sorry. I should just go. I can leave Hex.”

As he pushes to stand, I grab his wrist and tug him back down. “No, out of the question. You belong here now.”

“I could have belonged here nine years ago,” Beau mumbles. “Why didn’t you offer Hex when you refused the creche?”

It’s a good question. “We’re only allowed to work on one deal at a time.”

“You are the king. Surely the rules don’t apply to you.”

How wrong he is. I ignore the statement and continue my explanation. “Edward summoned me for the creche. It was a no. For me to take you to Hex, he would have had to summon me again and specifically ask for it. We are tight with security. Only people that need to know, know.”

“And he had no idea otherwise he would have asked you to take me to Hex back then.”

“Exacly.” I rub my temple. “Who was his wife? Do you know her maiden name? If she knew all about shifters and witches, I have to wonder who the hell she is.”

“Calista?”

I shoot up. “Calista Magefeld?”

“Yeah! Did you know her?”

“Fuck. Actually, yes.” I sink deeper into the couch. “And I’m the reason she’s dead.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

BEAU

My insides twist. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean I murdered her.” Poe pushes to his feet and paces. “She summoned me. Her beloved—Edward—was dying of cancer twenty years or so ago. She offered up ten years of her life to cure him. She was powerful and tried all she could as a witch, but nothing worked. Cancer is usually one of the things witches can’t heal, and she was desperate.”

“I’m glad you saved him for her.”

“No one passes up years or souls,” Poe says as if in a daze. “That’s the rule.”

“But you’re the king.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He shakes his head. “Enough about that. I want to help you.”

“Why do you want to help me?” Why now ?

“It’s what I do. I help.”

My insides twist and I have to force myself from reminding him that he hadn’t helped me when I needed it the most. He must sense it in me, though.

Poe picks up Creamsicle and nuzzles in her fur. He’s so... vulnerable right now. What’s happening?

Finally, he looks up at me again. “I am a cupid.”

I blink back at him. “What?”

“More specifically, a chaos cupid.”

“I thought you were the king of the crossroads demons.”

“I am. I’m also the original of the crossroads demons. I’m the most cursed of us all. It’s my fault we were all cursed, and it’s because of what I am. A chaos cupid demon. I pissed off the wrong person, and they punished me. All I’ve ever wanted was to help. It’s in my nature.”

Creamsicle purrs in his arms and he pets her while gazing at her lovingly. “I just want to help.”

I nod. “I don’t think I understand, but I don’t understand a lot.”

“Give me a few days and I’ll tell you my story and answer all your questions. But until then, I’d like to help you with your storm problem. I think a bit of exposure therapy can help.”

I suck in a breath. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Exactly what you think it means. But I can do it in a safe way. I can create the illusion of a storm and stop it at anytime.”

“Do you think it’ll really help me?” I fist my hands and rub them over my thighs. The idea is both thrilling and terrifying. “Edward was amazing, but I know it frustrated him when I freaked out during storms and hid in the basement. But the basement was the only safe place I knew of in his house, even if it was scary down there.”

“I think we should try. But only if you’re willing. We can use the stoplight system.”

I cock my head as I search for the meaning. “What does that mean? I know what stoplights are, but...”

Poe grins and I swear his red eyes glow. “We’ll start the experiment and if at any point you want it to end, just say red. Or yellow if you need some space to breathe and we’ll talk things out. Green means you’re good to go.”

I nod. “Simple enough.” I nibble my thumbnail. “But not tonight.”

“We’ll start when you’re ready.” Poe plops back on the couch and sighs. “This makes me happy.”

A warmth rushes across my cheeks. I’ve made this incredibly attractive demon happy.

“Why are you blushing over there?” He teases me.

“Nothing. Just thinking.”

He cocks a brow and tips his head. “About what?”

I chew on my bottom lip. “I’m glad I made you happy,” I whisper.

“Like I said, I love helping people. And kitties.” He plants a kiss on Creamsicle’s head. “How about we go gather a few things from your place? I have plenty of guest bedrooms, but lack guest clothing.” He smacks his thighs and pushes to his feet.

“But it’s storming,” I whisper again.

“And I’ll be there to keep you safe.” He holds out his hand. “Trust me?”

“Okay.” I take his offering.

He pulls me closer and the scent of jasmine fills my senses in such a delightful way I don’t notice we’re in my apartment until the first clap of thunder startles me from my sniffing.

“There you are!” Sparkle jumps up from my small table and rushes to me. Before I can stumble back anymore, he pulls me into a hug.

Poe growls beside me.

“What’s your problem, Poe?” Sparkle pulls away and drops his hands to his hips.

Poe shakes his head. “Nothing. Nothing.” But there’s still that sexy growly timber in his voice. Is it possible this demon is maybe attached to me? Already?

“Sure. Sure.” Sparkle eyes him before turning back to my table. “Anyway, I had to go back to the store because mama forgot something on her list. I was going to visit you, but you weren’t there. Your phone was, though. Randy gave it to me to give it back to you. He said he wasn’t calling Poe back.”

I turn to Poe. “Were you mean to Randy?”

Poe holds up his hands. “No? Maybe a bit rude and short? I don’t know.”

Thunder rattles the windows, and the wall of my beloved teacups and saucers shake. My stomach flops. My heart races.

Sparkle says “BB” at the same time Poe says “Beau”. I only slightly catch Sparkle’s

reaction to my real name before I shift.

My clothes drift to the floor as I flap my wings, trying to get who knows where. I cry out. Searching for no one. Seeking shelter.

“Beau. Hey, sweetheart can you calm down for me?”

No. No. No. Only panic and fear flood my system. RED. RED. RED. But this isn’t a test. This is real life. Real storms. Real thunder. And worse of all, real lightning.

“He’s not calming down,” Sparkle says as he rushes to my bedroom. He knows what to do and how to help. I showed him, but I’m not sure it’ll be enough.

I screech at the next boom. I soar around the apartment trying to find some place my bat deems safe, but my mind won’t calm. Fire flashes behind my eyelids, the scent of burning infiltrates my memory.

Someone grabs me, and I flap in their arms trying to be bigger, intimidating. I need a way out. I snap and snap. Blind fear spurs me to act out. Pressure from the storm squeezes me and I don’t know if it’s my imagination or simply my anxiety playing with me. Someone throws something over me, closing off my sight. I can’t see around me, but instead of panicking further, I take a deep breath. A rumble of thunder gets cut off.

“Beau, sweetheart, you’re safe. I got you.” Poe’s voice is so soft and gentle. If I were human, I’d be pink from head to toe. Instead, I refuse to shift back. Bat it is for the rest of my life because I just embarrassed myself.

“Rest, Beau. Creamsicle will probably investigate shortly. I’m going to go back and have Sparkle help me pick out clothes for you, okay? Any special requests?”

I squeak and stay bat snuggled in the blanket I find myself wrapped in.

“I’ll take that as a no.” The shimmer of energy that Poe exudes, leaves the room and I know he’s gone. Why does my heart feel so heavy because of it?

Soon Creamsicle muprrphs as she hops on the bed. I stay as still as possible, hoping she doesn’t see me as a toy while I’m bat. She snuggles close and her purrs calm my nerves so much I fall asleep.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

POE

Sparkle stares at me when I teleport back to Beau's apartment. "I had no idea it was that bad." He slumps back into the chair at the small table. "I thought it might have been something silly, but it's a full-blown problem."

"It is. Did he tell you what happened before?"

Sparkle nods. "Said he shifted at a store and a lady told him about Hex."

"Did you know he's not registered?"

Sparkle goes pale. "I had no idea. Mama isn't gonna get into trouble, right? We didn't know."

I hold up a hand. "No, nothing to worry about. I just wish I knew Beau was here. Hex needs another layer of protection because of him. Like we had to do for Gabe when he joined Hex. Nephilims are serious business, and so are bat shifters."

Sparkle huffs as he fiddles with Beau's phone. "BB never leaves without his phone because he's always got his eye on the weather." He pushes back to his feet and hands me the device. "I didn't even know his name was Beau. I thought we were close."

Sparkle's green eyes plead with me.

"Kitty Cat, he told me you were his best friend. I think he's a ball of anxiety and

doesn't want to tell all his secrets, even if he trusts someone. He doesn't want to burden them with his pain. It took a bit to get him to tell me about why he's so afraid of storms."

"His family, right?"

I nod and join him at the table. "I'm keeping him in the demon realm until the storms pass here. Then he's going to show me where the hole in the veil is. I'm going to get him registered and I think I'm going to see if I can find him a colony to join. He might be happier if he were with his own kind after all these years." Though the idea makes my heart ache.

In the few hours I've been around him, I know he's a good match for Hex. "What I don't understand is why he wasn't a part of a colony to begin with." I don't want to pry further, but I might need to. What if he has family out there, but he didn't know how to find them because he was so young or maybe his parents never told him.

"You like him," Sparkle pokes my arm.

"Perhaps. He's very sweet, but very young."

"Everyone is young compared to you. You're like a bazillion and two, right?" Sparkle gives me a grin and bats his lashes.

"Four hundred and twenty-three in April."

His mouth drops open. "You're actually younger than I thought."

"Most people think I'm five hundred plus, but I still have several decades before I get there." Most only know the rumors and smoke and mirrors in place to keep the truth from everyone. Of my four hundred and twenty-three years, I've only been the king

of crossroads demons for three hundred and eight years. My true nature as a cupid chaos demon changed the entire direction of my life and thousands of others. All because of love. Tainted love because of me.

“What is that face about?” Sparkle wiggles a manicured finger in my face. “You’re thinking way too hard about something.”

“Not at all. I came back because I was hoping you’d still be here and could help me pack a bag for Beau.”

“No problem. While we’re at it, I’ll give you a few warnings.”

“Warnings?”

He taps a manicured finger to his lips. “Warnings might not be the best word. I’ll just talk, okay?” He leads me to Beau’s bedroom, which is clean and everything seems to have a place.

There’s what appears to be a futon mattress on the floor, but no frame. It has at least half a dozen pillows, which makes me think of a nest. There are a few stuffed bats in the bed and I grab one to take with me.

“He really likes teacups and saucers.” I finger a pink one on a shelf with dozens of others.

“Loves them. We should pack him a set. But back to some helpful information on sweet Beau.” Sparkle tests the name and nods. He rummages in the closet and finds a bag. “Beau will stay naked if given the chance. We’ve had several naked sleepovers.”

The growl slips out without permission. My eyes go wide and I slap a hand over my mouth. “Sorry about that.”

Sparkle chuckles. “No need to be jealous. It was all innocent. I like being naked, he likes being naked. It wasn’t weird. It’s not like I can walk around naked upstairs with my family, okay? And most of the time we were under blankets cuddling, anyway.”

Another growl and Sparkle snorts.

“He has zero shame around nudity and honestly, that’s how it should be.” Sparkle gives a sharp nod. “He’s also a virgin.”

I swallow.

“He also never had any kind of sex education, so I taught him what I know from consent right down to taking him to Maude’s for toys.” Sparkle waves to the corner, where a bag from the sex shop sits alone.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I don’t want you to hurt my friend. He’s ridiculously naïve. And he’s also so fucking smart. He may not have gone to school, but he’s probably genius level on some things. Who knows? Did you notice the new layout of Hex Grocer? That was BB. He analyzed everything. Customers, flow, everything, then proposed a new layout. Randy let him run with it. He hired a few people to get it done one night. The store is more profitable and people are happier. I don’t know how he does it. Then there are other projects. Some days I wanna tap into that brain of his.”

“That was Beau?” I remember how cluttered the grocery store used to be and how nice it is now.

“Sure was.” Sparkle beams up at me.

“I won’t hurt him. At least not intentionally.”

“I know. I know.” He waves his hand around. “I just worry about him.” Sparkle goes back to packing the bag.

I hand over the stuffed bat, and he adds it to the clothes.

“That should do it.” He grabs what appears to be a thin baby blanket from the closet door. “He likes to hang from it, so find someplace secure.”

“Will do. Is there anything else I should know to make his stay easier?”

“He loves fruit, but especially bananas and watermelons.”

“I’ll be sure to stock up.” I grin. Maybe I should research what kind of foods to buy for his bat.

“I think he’ll be okay, but call me?”

“I’ll give you updates. And thanks for this. I lift the bag over my shoulder.”

“Anything for BB.” He pats my arm and waves as I teleport to the grocery to grab a medley of fruit for my sweet houseguest.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

BEAU

I thrash, trying to get away from the fire in my mind. It's everywhere. Everywhere. Wood burns all around me. I can't get away. My body can't decide which form it wants and cycles between human and bat. Human and bat. Human and bat. Neither feels right, but at least I can fly as a bat. I screech and chirp, but the visions aren't of the forest, but a bedroom.

“Beau! Beau!”

“ Muurpph! ”

I can't wake from the nightmare ravaging my mind.

“Beau!” It's Poe's voice, loud and sharp.

Before I can clear my head, I smack into something hard and tumble back. Back. Back. Into that burning forest of my nightmares.

Poe

Upon arriving home and looking in on Beau, he was in the middle of a panic attack. He shifted between human and bat until he knocked himself out, running into the bedpost. He hit so hard I thought he might have done major damage.

His shift to human happens as soon as he lands on the bed.

His breathing comes rapidly, and he's drenched in sweat.

"Beau?" I press a hand to his forehead.

His eyes flutter open, but he doesn't move. He blinks and tears slide down his face.

"Do you have nightmares every night?"

He nods and looks away from me. "Every time I shut my eyes some days." I have to strain to hear him. He's so quiet.

My heart aches for this man. "That's a long time to suffer."

"I deserve it."

"No, you don't. You've lived with this burden so long. Let me help you release it." I could ask one of the covens for a solution, but I'm not sure he wants to completely erase the memory.

"I don't even remember what they looked like. The dreams might not even have their real faces anymore. But at least they're something." He pushes to sit, and like Sparkle said, Beau isn't ashamed he's naked in front of me. Why would he be? He's a shifter.

"Why don't you go take a shower?"

He shakes his head. "Can't. Too much like rain." He trembles and pulls his knees to his chest. "Can't get wet, then I can't fly."

"You're safe here, Beau."

He just nods. "I know."

"Would it help if I were with you?"

"What do you mean with me?" He side-eyes me, and I have to wonder if he's as naïve as Sparkle thinks he is.

I hold up a finger and teleport to my closet. I undress and throw my clothes in the hamper, then grab a pair of swim shorts.

I teleport back to the guest room and Beau scooted to the edge of the bed.

"It's a huge shower. I can stand in the corner. If you feel like the water's too much, I can step in and hold you."

"Okay." But he doesn't move from the edge of the bed.

"You don't have to do anything, though." The stench of fear still lingers in the air. "The sheets are soaked in sweat, though, and I'd like to change those for you before you try to sleep again."

He pushes to his feet. "I'll wash up. You don't have to come with me."

"If you're sure?"

"Yeah, I need to..." He scrunches his eyes closed. "I'm okay." His stomach grumbles and he clutches it as his entire body flushes pink. "I might be a little hungry."

"Okay, how about you wash up and I'll make us something to eat?" I lift the bag I brought with me. "You'll find some clothes here. Sparkle packed what he thought you'd like."

"Thank you." He unzips the bag and gasps. "Berry!" He pulls the stuffed bat from the

bag and squeezes it close. "I usually can't sleep without him. I found him in a trashcan one day and had to save him."

I must have made a face because he giggles, and the sound fills me with joy. The sweetest smile lifts his lips and there's a spark in his eyes now.

"He wasn't dirty, well, not much. I had to save him, though. Had to." He hugs the stuffie closer.

"Well, I'm glad we packed him then. Hop in the shower and by the time you're done, I'll have something good to eat ready."

He lays the bat stuffie on the bed and pats his head before grabbing the bag and padding butt ass naked to the bathroom. But he stiffens when I gasp.

"Who the fuck hurt you?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

BEAU

Well, how do I explain the perils of being a bat?

“I promise it’s not what you think.” I chew on my bottom lip. “It’s ridiculous, really.”

“What the fuck happened?” Poe uses his sexy, deep demon voice that seems to rattle not only the house but me. Which is unfortunate when I’m naked and he’s not. He doesn’t take his eyes off my back. My very scratched up back that looks like someone attacked me.

“Did you know cats like to smack bats out of the sky and, in some cases hunt them? I didn’t.” I shuffle from foot to foot nervous of his reaction.

“A cat did this to you?!”

“It was my own fault. I shouldn’t have flown so close to the ground. I didn’t see the cat and by the time I did, it was too late and it batted me to the ground to either play with or try to eat. I got away as fast as I could, then nursed the wounds in an attic for a few days.” Those were not great days.

Poe pinches the bridge of his nose. “I never would have come up with a cat. I was imagining all sorts of nefarious scenarios.”

“This time was a cat. But this...” I point to a dip in my shoulder. “Some guy stabbed me and that’s?—”

“Fucking stabbed you?!” Poe’s eyes glow brighter and I swear smoke comes from his flared nostrils.

I can’t help but laugh. “Yes, stabbed because he thought I was trying to steal his food. All I wanted was to share his fire. I’d already raided the dumpster. The only thing that sucks about being a bat shifter is I can shift and eat all the insects and fruit I want, but if I want to shift back, I’ll have to eat more. I can stay bat and eat as a bat for as long as I want. But I’m a shifter and sometimes crave human things. I also don’t want to be feral. I heard too many horror stories of feral shifters and don’t want that happening to me, so I try to shift regularly.”

“That’s a wise choice, even if the most severe of the feral shifters tend to be wolves rejected from their packs. Speaking of packs. Were you a part of a colony?”

I nod. “We were heading there to reunite when the storm came through.”

“And you didn’t want?—”

“I didn’t really know where we were other than a forest in West Virginia. I didn’t know how to get where the colony was. All I know is that it was somewhere in West Virginia. I’ve never been able to find it.” My shoulders drop. “As much as I loved Edward, I wish I would have stayed in the woods. Someone probably would have come looking for us and found me.” I blink back tears. “As much as I understand why places like Hex are so secretive, there are people like me out there. And I don’t blame you for my life, okay? Shit happens. I just wish I didn’t have to relive the death of my parents every time it storms and every time I try to sleep.” I’m tired. So fucking tired.

Poe’s face softens. “Have you been to Renaud’s Solution Shop?”

“No? But I don’t get out much. Sparkle is trying to get me out of my hidey hole.”

Poe slaps his knee and straightens his posture. “Next time you go on an adventure with Sparkle, you should stop in. Get something called sleep powder. It’s from a Sandman and calibrated for sweet dreams. I’d pop in right now, but it’s closed.”

“I’ll look into it. Thank you.”

Poe dips his head. “I should let you...” He waves towards the bathroom door and then he’s gone.

I let out a breath and race to the bathroom to glare at the shower. I hadn’t examined it earlier because I was in panic mode. What the hell is this contraption? There are dials and knobs and an overhead shower head and one on each side, then what appears to be jets on the sides.

I poke a button, and the side jets turn on, making me jump. I poke it again, hoping to turn them off and by now I’m drenched. Thank goodness Poe has shower essentials in bottles attached to the wall, but I need to figure out the shower first.

I turn a knob, and a gentle stream of water comes from the center head. The water is so slow it really does remind me of the rain. Evil rain.

I pump the shampoo bottle a few times and scrub it through my hair before stepping under the water. It’s warm and cozy despite me being prickly about being wet.

My hair suds up as I scrub the shampoo out and I go back for conditioner. Sparkle told me all about it and I like how it makes my hair so soft.

I power through the rest of my shower with the supplied soap bar and washrag, making sure I hit every inch before shutting off the water.

Poe has fresh clean towels and I press one to my face, breathing in the subtle scent.

Everything in Poe's house screams luxury. It's a nice difference in comparison to my own life. Edward was a simple man. Then I chose to live on the streets.

Could I have gone out and gotten a job and found an apartment among humans? Yes, but it felt wrong all alone. It felt like a lie I didn't want to live through. My life isn't horrible, I love flying and being bat. But I also love the human treats and stuffed toys and blankets. Blankets are the best. Being cozy is the best, and it's hard to be cozy as a bat sometimes.

I dry myself quickly and throw on a pair of leggings and a shirt that's always been too big on me. Sparkle says I look cute in the outfit and I trust his judgement.

I swipe my hands through my hair, hoping my curls don't dry weird. When I leave the bathroom, I grab my headphones from the bag and plop them over my ears. Creamsicle purrs from the bed and I pat her little head before leaving the room.

I do wonder one thing about Poe that doesn't set right with me and I need an answer.

When I reach the kitchen, Poe's still shirtless, but he's switched to a pair of gray sweatpants. Sparkle told me about gray sweatpants and I didn't believe him at the time, but Poe's ass fills his out.

I swallow, and he turns to face me. My eyes immediately dart down and my skin burns hot at the imprint of him.

"There you are. I hope your shower was satisfactory?"

I cough and force myself to look him in the eyes and not the dick. "It was lovely." My voice is a croak, and I cough again.

"Water?" Poe's cropped tail opens the fridge while he continues cooking something

on the stove.

“What happened to your tail?” I slap a hand to my mouth. “Sorry, that’s rude isn’t it?”

Poe looks back as if he’s forgotten he has a tail. “Ah, that. Prank gone wrong. Had to amputate a bit of it.” He shrugs. “Still works though.” He grabs a water bottle with said tail and hands it over. “I forget it’s not as long as it used to be.”

“What do you mean a prank gone wrong?”

He leans against the countertop with a spatula in his hand. “I hope you like pancakes. I should have asked.”

“I don’t think I’ve had them before?”

“Then you’re in for a treat!” His tail sways behind him and he grabs it with his free hand. “This happened decades ago, Pike was eager to make his fellow crechelings laugh. He called for me. I showed up only to land in a pile of marbles. I lost my footing. Fell down a flight of stairs. Crushed my tail so badly it wouldn’t heal, so we ended up chopping it off.” Poe shrugs. “I didn’t have a tail before the curse, so losing a part of it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Speaking of this curse...” I hop up to a bar stool against the island. “Why did you insist I tell you my drama trauma and you tell me I have to wait to understand what you mean about being a chaos cupid and about this curse business? I didn’t know crossroads demons were cursed. I thought you just existed.”

“That’s what we, well, I, wanted everyone to think. I fucked up.”

I watch as he flips a few pancakes cooking on a griddle on the stove. “Tell me about

it. It might help.”

He laughs and waggles his spatula at me. “Using my own words back at me. Very clever.”

“I’m pretty smart once I understand something.” I tap my temple and lean in.

“That’s what I hear.”

I groan and throw my head back. “Sparkle told you about the grocery, didn’t he? I just analyzed the store one night while I stocked and?—”

“You know most people don’t do that, right?”

“Well, I do now.” I grin up at him and fight to keep my eyes from drifting down his chest.

“You are right, though. It’s not fair that I keep you from my own drama trauma.” He frowns though and flips the pancakes to a plate before starting another round.

“What you see is part of my punishment. I wasn’t born with horns or red eyes or leathery wings. My demon type, a chaos cupid demon, is soft. My wings were feathered. My eyes were a lovely shade of brown. Not as lovely as yours, though.”

I swallow because I’m pretty sure he’s flirting with me. “And no horns?”

“Exactly, no horns. Chaos cupids create love in chaos.”

My brows scrunch. “Create love in chaos?”

“Yes. Take Pike and Lark, for example.” Poe gestures as if to point them out in a

crowd, but it's only the two of us.

"The demon and fae that run Flutter and Fangs?"

"Yes, have you been? It's lovely since they took over. The born witch that owned it before was a piece of work."

I shake my head. "Sparkle keeps trying to get me to go, but I'm too afraid."

"Of what?" Poe cocks his head and leans against the counter again, watching me.

I try not to squirm under his stare. "I'm pretty much a scaredy cat, okay? If I don't know what's going to happen, I don't want to deal with it. But Sparkle helps."

There's a tick in Poe's jaw.

"Are you jealous of Sparkle?" I tease.

"He's a very attractive man." Poe basically grinds his teeth as he speaks.

"He is, but I'm not attracted to him like that. He's just a friend." We've had a whole conversation about it. Sparkle is attracted to Daddy types. Then he had to explain what that was, and I learned about kinks that day.

"A friend you cuddle with naked."

I snort out a laugh and slam my hand over my mouth again. "He told you about that, too?"

"He also told me you were a virgin."

“Fucking hell, Sparkle.” My face is on fire and I bury it in my hands.

“You’re very cute when you’re flustered.”

“Don’t make it worse!” I laugh and fake a glare.

“Adorable.” He plates the pancakes and nods his head to follow him. “I enjoy eating in the dining room.”

I follow him to a room with a table big enough for probably twenty people. There are already place settings at the head of the table and next to it and a tray full of syrups, butters, jams, and fruits. I hum a happy tune at a pair of teacups and saucers on the table.

“I have canned whipped cream, if you like that? And I can heat some chocolate.”

“I’m good with this. Thank you.” The spread is already impressive enough.

He pulls out a chair and gestures for me to sit. So I do. He scoots the chair closer to the table. He’s so elegant as he takes the seat at the head of the table.

“These look delicious.” My mouth waters as he places two pancakes on my plate.

“Thank you. I like to think I’ve perfected them.”

“How do I eat them?” I follow Poe’s lead as he cuts his into squares.

“Of course you can eat them however you like, but I drown mine in syrup.”

I lick my lips and watch as he picks up a glass bottle and the pancakes soak in the thick syrup.

He wiggles it at me and I take it to do the same.

“Edward never made you pancakes?”

I chuckle. “No. He taught me how to cook a lot of things, but never pancakes.”

“What sort of things?”

“Spaghetti is one of my favorites.”

“That’s always a good choice.”

I take my first bite and pure bliss bursts in my mouth. Sweet treats are my favorite.

“Pancakes go on my list of favorite foods.”

“I’m glad you enjoy them.”

“Now back to you being a chaos cupid.” I shove a bite in my mouth and stare him down.

“You don’t give up easily.”

“I only momentarily get distracted.” Another bite and I have to keep from moaning.

“Okay, we create love in chaos. For Pike and Lark, it was past time for Pike to find love. He’d been cooped up in the demon realm for twenty years after acquiring a soul from one of his deals. He didn’t have to work unless he was summoned, and he wasn’t going to be summoned again without a little help. He was stubborn about leaving the demon realm too and I’d had enough of his moping.”

“I don’t understand. I thought?—”

Poe smiles. "I'm still a chaos cupid despite being the king of crossroads demons. I still crave and require chaos and matchmaking."

"Sparkle said crossroads demons don't even know what their real demon types are. How do you?"

"Because I'm the original. Almost all outside knowledge is wrong, even what my crossroads demons know about themselves. That was my decision."

I eat more pancake as I take in the information.

"The rules of the crossroads demons are my creation to keep order. No killing outside of a deal. Can't tell anyone where your crossroads is. The sacrifice must have meaning. The sacrificer must be at least eighteen. Years and souls are never rejected, well almost never." Poe takes a few bites and we sit in silence as we eat. So far I'm a little confused, but hopefully everything makes sense in the end.

Poe dabs at his chin with a cloth napkin. "No one knows what their true demon type is until they're set free. And to set a crossroads demon free?—"

"You destroy their crossroads. That's why they can't tell anyone where their crossroads is or how to free them. Then everyone would be free. Right?"

"Exactly. Except that doesn't work for me. I have dozens of crossroads attached to me. My curse is more in tune to me as a chaos cupid."

"Which means?" I wave my fork at him, hoping he'll give me the answer.

"For me to be free of this curse, someone must fall in love with me."

I blink back. "Like Beauty and the Beast?"

“Something like that, yes. But a little different. The love must flourish in chaos. While chaos cupids created love in chaos, no one falls for us. No one trusts us.”

The knowledge makes my heart heavy. Everyone deserves love. Not necessarily romantic love, but unconditional love. “Are you the only chaos cupid that wants to help people?”

He gives me a sad little smile. “Don’t get me wrong. I love being a chaos cupid, even if I don’t appear as one anymore, but most chaos cupids are pure assholes.”

“You’re not. If you were, you never would have come and saved me from myself at the grocery store earlier. We met mere hours ago and you’ve already offered to help me.”

“I thrive on helping.”

I stab my next bite harder than I mean to. “So Pike needed a little help to find love. How did you accomplish that?”

Poe snorts and gives me a smirk. I’m sure he knows what I’m doing changing the topic back to Pike. “I tossed a Fae luck coin at Lark and let the ancient artifact do its thing.”

“Which was?”

He shrugs and takes a strawberry from a bowl of fruit offerings. “Help Lark find a way to freedom and to Pike’s crossroads. The rest is history, but I’m sure Lark will tell you their love story if you ever meet.”

I nod. “So you create situations.”

“Yes. Sometimes they go a little off course, but my pairings usually fall in love and last a lifetime. I’m proud of my work.”

“So what happened?” I grab a few grapes and pop them in my mouth.

“I fucked up.”

“You’ve said that.”

“I didn’t know a demon prince was already seeing someone. I put another in his path and it created chaos that blew up his life. I tried to end it, but the new love interest became obsessed and killed the true love interest.”

The heat drains from my face and my hand stops midway from the fruit bowl. “You couldn’t have known.”

“No, and that’s the plight of chaos cupids. When we don’t know the nature of someone, we can create harm instead of love.”

“So this prince cursed you to be the king of crossroads demons where you have to take deals?”

“Yes, and every demon that had ever associated with me, every demon I had matched, was also cursed. Thankfully, they can be freed rather easily with just the destruction of their crossroads. The prince knew none of this was their fault. He wanted to punish me by punishing innocents.”

“That’s cruel.” My shoulders drop and I’m not sure I have an appetite anymore.

“It’s what I deserved.”

I snort, and he looks up at me with a question in his eyes.

“I always tell myself I deserve to be terrified of storms and rain because I couldn’t save my parents. I know deep down I don’t, but it’s hard not to think that.”

“I think?—”

“No , you didn’t know what was going to happen.”

“But I should have used caution when it came to one of the princes.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you. You shouldn’t be punished for your nature.”

He tips his head and licks at the syrup on his lips. “In any case, I fucked up and have been dealing with it for over three hundred years.”

“Which is super long.” I can’t imagine having to live with such a punishment.

“Not in the grand scheme of things. It’s a blink of the eye. But I’m not looking forward to telling Van the truth one day. He’ll never be king because this is my punishment. Everyone from the creche was taught the kingship could be passed down. Everyone from the beginning had their memories affected so they didn’t know what happened and why they weren’t what they were before. That was the prince’s decision. I would have told him to let them keep their memories. If I’m ever freed from this curse, my remaining crossroads demons will be free, and everyone will gain their memory back.”

“Are you afraid of that?” I would be.

“Terrified. I also didn’t expect so many of my demons to gain freedom. There were hundreds, maybe thousands. I’m down to two.”

“Perhaps it’s time to stop letting fear stop you. And that’s me saying it.” I stuff another bite in my mouth and grin. “Maybe we can help each other.”

“Are you saying you want to fall in love with me?”

“Whose to say I’m not already yours? I’ve been dreaming about a big, sexy demon since I was fifteen.” I shrug nonchalantly and he snorts at me, so I wink. “You left an impression.”

Poe looks at his nails as if to seem disinterested. “I forgot you entirely as soon as I got back home. No offense.” He winks back at me.

“None taken. I was hiding behind Edward. Besides, it would have been super creepy had you lusted after me.” I grimace at the thought and shiver.

“Ew. Very creepy.”

“Anyway, I’m not saying I’m in love with you or anything. We don’t know much about each other. Well, other than some of our deepest, darkest secrets. Dun dun dunnnnn .”

That draws an honest laugh from him and I can’t help but join. Poe is handsome all the time, but most handsome when he’s laughing, or smiling.

He scrubs a hand through his hair before taking a drink of his water. He dabs at his mouth again. “I have a strange question. Well, I have more, but this is the one in the front of my mind.”

“Shoot.”

“Where did you get my phone number?”

I grin into my water glass as I take a drink. I pat my mouth with my napkin like he had. “The library. I walked right in, asked for the information of the leaders and the shock I got when I saw your name, and crossroads demon king as leader. I had no idea you were here. Edward summoned you in West Virginia. Anyway, I wrote your number down and used it for my application.”

“West Virginia is one of my least busy crossroads.”

“We had to climb pretty far up.”

“It was a very old road.”

“I still don’t know how Edward knew about it and why the heck we didn’t go to one closer.”

“Not every crossroads has a demon attached. Calista must have told him how to figure it out.”

“How does one discover the right kind of crossroads to summon a demon?”

“Next time we’re in Hex, I’ll show you.” Poe yawns and stretches. “I can whip up a dessert if you want?”

I pat my stomach. “I think I’m about to burst.” I haven’t eaten so much in weeks.

A soft smile lifts Poe’s lips, but he yawns again, making him snarl. “Excuse me, it’s been a long day.”

“Tell me about it.” I chuckle and fight my own yawn.

“We had a Hex council meeting, and I probably owe them an apology.”

“Why so?” I lean in.

“They wanted to talk about the wards and I shot them down.”

I ball my hands on my knees. “Sorry about that. But nothing’s happened, right?”

“I think we just have the one stowaway.” He taps his bottom lip with a finger. “But I’ll need to investigate tomorrow. I’ll probably be out most of the day. I’m happy to bring Sparkle over if you’d like?”

I chew my bottom lip. “I’m not really a stowaway since I knew about Hex after that lady told me about it. Right?”

“Right, but I still need to find out why the hell the wards didn’t notify me. I should have gotten at least a nudge, but I got nothing.”

“Maybe it’s because my bat is so small?”

“Hmmm. Maybe? But that’s an investigation for tomorrow. I did put out a notice to be on the look out for people no one knows.”

“People know me,” I point out.

“True. In any case, I put hellhounds around the perimeter. No one is coming in.”

“Unless they can fly.” I shrug.

“I have a flight of griffins on the look out. I don’t think anything is going to happen, but I want to be prepared, since I know there is a tear in the magic.”

“Aren’t you worried?”

“You’ve been here three months. I think it’ll be okay to wait until the storms pass through before you show me where you got in. Besides, storms are dangerous times to do this type of magic. So we have to go old school with watchmen.”

“If you’re sure?”

“Yes.”

I can’t fight the next yawn.

“I think it’s time for bed. Let me know if you want me to bring Sparkle over for you tomorrow. I’ll check in on you before I leave.” Poe pushes to his feet and I follow suit.

My bedroom is across the hall from Poe’s and I feel comfortable being so close.

We both hesitate at our doors. Poe looks to me. “If you keep your door open, Creamsicle will probably join you.”

I nod. “I don’t want to steal your cat.”

He grins and shakes his head. “Creamsicle does what Creamsicle does. I’ll warn you, she’ll probably lick you awake or stick her butt in your face.”

I snort. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Good night, Beau.”

I don’t know why, but those simple words fill me with joy.

“Good night, Poe.” I leave my door cracked just slightly.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

POE

I wake to a screeching cat batting at my face. “What’s wrong, sweetie pie?” I hold Creamsicle up to keep her from swatting at me again. Which is when I hear the noises coming from Beau’s room. The flutter of wings, then the screams. The cries. My heart twists as I push to my feet. Beau’s having another nightmare and I hope I can help him.

He’s stuck in the same shifting between human and bat as before. Every time he shifts to his human form, he thumps so hard on the ground or the bed.

“Beau!” I grab the stuffed bat from the bed and the small blanket Sparkle told me to hang somewhere secure and hold them both in the air. “Beau, sweetheart, you’re having a bad bad dream. Can you come to me? I have a nice blanket to wrap you up in. I have Berry.”

Beau screeches and flies right at me, and it takes everything in me not to flinch. Those talons look sharp.

He latches onto the stuffed bat and cries.

“I know. You had a long day. Let’s get some rest.” I walk us both back to my bedroom with me clutching the stuffed bat to my chest. Creamsicle meorros next to me, but careful not to trip us up. She’s as concerned as I am. “We’ll help him. He needs to know he’s safe.” I kiss the top of Beau’s tiny bat head. “You’re safe here with me and I’ll make sure Hex is even safer.” I don’t know if that’s even a thing, but I’ll do my best.

I settle on the bed and lay back with Beau and the stuffed bat in my arms. Creamsicle hops on the bed and nuzzles into my side with her paw on my arm, claiming me and Beau, no doubt.

Beau's breathing calms and he falls asleep quickly in my arms. My eyelids close even though I want to watch him.

My alarm hasn't gone off yet, but I'm wide awake. In the night, Beau shifted to his human form. His weight feels right in my arms, especially with Creamsicle softly snoring next to me. I can help Beau. I know it. And if not, I know several therapists he can talk to. Actually, that's not a bad idea. Many of my crossroads demons have talked to a therapist.

I know sometimes I wasn't the best person for them to look up to, but I always did what I could.

I punished who needed to be punished, but not so harshly it destroyed their lives. Not one of my demons has died under my watch.

Beau sighs in his sleep, he looks so sweet and content. He moans and ruts against me. My arms go stiff. What the fuck do I do? He adjusts in his sleep and he's nestled against my neck, his breath tickling the hair there, and I swallow back a moan. My throat is sensitive, and it's been centuries since I've last slept with anyone. He straddles my thigh in his sleep and humps my leg as he clutches me tighter.

I stare at the ceiling. If he wakes himself up, he's going to be so embarrassed, I bet. But fuck, the little grunts and moans make me hard.

"Beau," I croak out. "Sweetheart, it's—" My alarm blares from the nightstand and Beau startles awake, pushing away from me.

His heart pounds and he sucks in breaths as he looks around.

"Hey, are you okay?" I ask.

"What happened?" He swipes a hand through his hair and his eyes go wide when he notices my erection trapped in my sweatpants. He probably notices the trail of precum as well.

"You had a nightmare, and I brought you in here to sleep. I think you slept pretty well, even Creamsicle was impressed." I scratch under her chin when she comes to lick my nose.

Beau nods and pulls his knees to his chest. "Sorry. Sparkle says sometimes I have nightmares and I find him in his cat form in my bed comforting me."

"That's very sweet of him."

Beau's face flushes a pretty shade of pink, and he waves towards me. "Sorry for... uh. Humping you. At least I think I did. I was dreaming about something wonderful and sometimes apparently I act out my dreams."

I bite back a grin. "You can hump me anytime."

"Fucking hell, Poe!" he laughs and buries his face in his hands. His skin turns even darker.

"Darling, no one's touched me since before I got cursed." Mostly my own choice, but also everyone knows why I was cursed and don't want to have anything to do with me. I've also not been looking for partners. So many think all demons are horn dogs, and that's not the case with me.

"Well, I didn't mean to and I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Hungry? Have you messaged Sparkle about coming over today? I need to eat breakfast, then I'll need to head out."

"Sparkle said he'd love to come snoop around your house."

I snort. "That sounds exactly like Sparkle."

"Sparkle is definitely going to snoop if he comes over."

"I'm prepared for that. He's going to be disappointed because I have nothing interesting to snoop for."

"I'm sure he'll find something interesting to him."

I swing around to the side of the bed and stand, forgetting I have morning wood at full attention. It seems to capture Beau's gaze before he snaps his eyes away.

"Sorry," he mumbles as he slides off the bed.

"I'm okay with you looking, sweetie." I'd be okay if he wanted to experiment while he's here.

"It's rude. At least according to Edward."

"What do you mean, rude?" My teeth grind. "So help me if that man was homophobic."

"What? No. No. He didn't care, but he did say it's rude to stare openly at people, especially if I thought they were good looking. And... so... I figured opening staring

at your dick is probably rude too." He grins up at me and bites his bottom lip.  
"Sorry."

I snort and lean over to pet Creamsicle's head. "It's fine. How about you get dressed and meet me for breakfast, then I'll grab Sparkle and the two of you can snoop away the day."

Beau nods and pads out of the room, and I watch his cute butt as he walks away.

"Sorry!" I call out.

He peeks back around the door. "For what?" His brows scrunch and I can't hide my smile.

"For watching your butt as you walked away."

That makes him laugh, and the sound makes my soul so happy.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

BEAU

" F uuuuuck," Sparkle turns in the foyer and looks up to the chandelier. "I knew he had to be loaded, but this is an honest to goodness palace."

"Right?!" I spin like Sparkle with my head back, just taking in the decor. The marble floor is so clean, like the kitchen, I can see our reflection.

Sparkle drops a bag he brought on a decorative table with a vase of wispy flowers that sway in the artificial wind he created.

"So, Poe said the best places will be his bedroom and his closet, so obviously we'll snoop there first. Then I want to see if he has a big theater room somewhere. We could watch something naughty on the big screen." He wiggles his brows. "Oh, and I want to test out a bed, so I'll need a nap sometime."

"The beds are nice."

"Beds? Beds?" He eyes me up and down. "How many beds have you slept in?"

I hold up two fingers and he squeals.

"Tell me everything!"

"It's not exactly exciting." But I tell him everything. By the time I finish, he's frowning.

"I'm really concerned about you." He squeezes my arm but pulls me into a hug. "I hope Poe can help. If not, you know I'm here for you, right? You never have to go through anything alone ever again."

I lean into his hold and he stays wrapped around me until I pull away.

"Thank you, Sparkle."

"Anytime." He swipes my bangs from my eyes. He's always so caring and it's no wonder his six siblings adore him. He's a master at helping people feel better.

"Let's get to snooping!" he says. "I brought snacks!" He lifts his bag from the table. "Lead the way to the demon's bedroom." He threads his arm through mine and we skip up the stairs.

With Sparkle, it's easy to find myself having fun.

" Prrummp! " Creamsicle says as she meets us at the landing.

"Oh! Who is this?" Sparkle drops to his knees and starts scratching her head. "You're so sweet. You remind me of my sisters."

"That's Creamsicle. She's a normie."

"I love her." He rubs his cheek against her head, then Creamsicle follows us to Poe's bedroom.

As soon as we make it to Poe's room, Sparkle spins again, taking in the entire room. "The dresser. There's gotta be good stuff in there."

"Like underwear? That's not very interesting."

“No, but some people store secrets among their panties.”

I cock a brow. “Weird place to put their secrets, but you’re the expert.”

“Follow me.” Sparkle skips to the four drawer dresser pressed against the wall opposite of the bed. He squats and opens the bottom drawer. “We’ll work our way up.” He lifts the piles of clothes and places them on the floor and frowns. “Hmmm.”

“What are you hoping to find?” I squat to join him, poking at a pair of socks.

“Something interesting.”

“Like what?”

“Dunno. Scandalous pictures from the nineties or something. Naked pictures. Lacy panties. Dildos. Anal beads.”

“What makes any of that interesting?”

“You sweet summertime child.”

“I was born in the spring.”

Sparkle pinches the bridge of his nose like Poe does. He sighs. “It’s a saying. Means you’re innocent.”

I blink back at him and shrug. “I guess?”

Sparkle snorts and turns back to the dresser. “Nothing here.” He refills the dresser exactly how he found it. “The trick is to memorize where everything was so the person doesn’t know you snooped around.”

“But Poe already knows we’re snooping.”

“True and in this case it’ll just be rude if I don’t put things back.” He shifts through the other three drawers and comes up even more disappointed. “Nothing. Maybe the nightstand.” He rushes over and I sit on the edge of the bed while he rummages around. “Ah ha!” He lifts something that looks like a flashlight. “A flashlight!” Sparkle gives it a full examination, right down to sniffing it. “Clean. Probably hasn’t been used in a while. If ever.” He places it back in its spot in the drawer. “Boring so far. Let’s try the closet.”

I follow him into the walk-in closet. I just don’t understand this whole snooping business.

“This is bigger than my entire house.” Sparkle takes it all in as well.

Poe has a lot of clothes and shoes and boots. The boots... I’d love to see him in a pair. My imagination plugs in an image of him in leather pants and boots and nothing else.

“What are you thinking about?” Sparkle grins as he flips through Poe’s hanging shirts.

“Nothing.”

“Sure. Sure.” Sparkle rolls his eyes and pulls a cowboy hat from a shelf above. “Interesting. Interesting.” He plops it on his head and goes back to rummaging around.

“What’s that for?” I point to another door on the far wall.

Sparkle scrambles to investigate and yanks it open. His eyes go wide. “It could be a

murder room.”

“We shouldn’t go in.” I grab his hand.

“Poe said we can snoop.” Sparkle takes a step inside and disappears. There’s a thump and a scream, then a giggle.

“Sparkle!”

Creamsicle rubs her face against my shin before following.

“Creamsicle!”

“It’s okay,” Sparkle laughs. “It’s a slide. Come down here, it’s so fucking cool!”

I take a tentative step forward and slide down. My heart pounds and I land on a soft pillow.

“Where are we?” I ask as I push to my feet.

“Well, not a murder room.”

There’s a soft glow along the wall. It takes a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the even dimmer light.

“I think we found that theater room.” Sparkle skips to a row of several plush seats and plops down on one before he bounces over to a wall with a projector and instructions.

“Wanna watch something? I can connect my phone.”

“Sure.” It’s less nerve-wracking than watching Sparkle parade around Poe’s house looking for things to investigate.

“Oh! He has so many blankets and stuffies to choose from!” He’s got his head inside a box and pulls out several blankets and stuffed toys. “And candy!” He grabs several boxes. “Let’s sit together and snuggle.”

Creamsicle meows and hops into my lap as soon as we’re settled.

“Any requests?” Sparkle asks as he wiggles his phone.

“Something funny,” I suggest.

“Perfect.”

I adjust my headphones so they don’t slip back. Sparkle picks a movie he says was popular before either of us were born and we relax into the story.

POE

I 'm not afraid of Sparkle finding anything he shouldn't because none of my secrets are stored in my house. If Beau chooses to tell his friend what I told him about me, then so be it.

My jaw twitches as Randy the Hex Grocer manager tells me why he never asked for Beau's permit.

"He was in Hex. Everyone knows you can't get in unless you know about it."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, realizing it's not the best type of ward. Even so, I should have been given a warning that someone new had entered and that's what has me most concerned. "Do you have anyone else you didn't check for a permit?"

"Nope, BB is the latest hire."

"Okay, thanks."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No, why do people keep asking me that?"

"Because you're scary." Randy shrugs and his wolf tail drops.

I blink back. "I don't mean to be scary?" I sigh and my shoulders sag.

“It’s the whole king thing. No one’s afraid of demons around here. But you being a king of demons, none of us want to cross you.”

“Ah. I’m just a regular guy, well, demon.”

“Uh huh, sure, sure.” Randy won’t look me in the eyes now.

“What if I weren’t the king?”

“Dunno because you are.”

“But if I weren’t?”

“I guess you’d just be some regular demon, like you said.”

“Would you still be afraid of me?”

“Why would I be?”

I sigh. “Nevermind. Thanks for chatting with me and don’t forget to give me the info for the people working Beau’s shifts while he’s out.”

Randy wipes a hand through his hair. “He doing okay? We’re all worried about him.”

“Because he’s with me?”

“No.” Randy holds up his hands. “It’s because we’d never seen him have a panic attack before. We all like the kid.”

I give him a soft smile. “I think he’ll be okay. I’m going to see if he’ll talk to a therapist.”

“That’ll be good for him.”

I nod. “Thanks again.” I teleport to the Boots’s house and knock, hoping Mrs. Boots is home. I’m grateful the porch has a roof, I don’t like the idea of getting soaked through. Thunder rumbles and the rain pours harder.

It takes a few minutes, but one of the kids answers.

“Hi ya, Mr. King, sir.” It’s the littlest, a boy named Farris. He’s got the same white blond hair as Sparkle and the rest of the family.

“Hey, is your mama around?”

“One sec!” Farris shifts to his cat form, which looks so much like Sparkle’s. He runs back into the house and not two minutes later, Emily Boots follows.

“Poe, what do we owe this surprise visit for?” Emily presses a hand to her chest.

Farris pounces at her feet, and she bends to scratch his head. “Baby, can you go play in your room for me?” She loosely ties his fallen clothes around his waist and the kid runs back through the house. She smooths down her shirt when she stands upright again. “Please come in.”

“This won’t take long. I was wondering why you hadn’t asked Beau for his permit before renting to him.”

She blinks up at me. “Because he’s in Hex. Everyone knows?—”

“I hold up a hand. Yes, I know. Which makes it hard to know when we have new residents. We need to know they’re here so we can put protections in place. Beau is a bat shifter. If someone with bad intentions came?—”

“I thought there was a ward against that kind of thing?” Emily chews on her bottom lip. “Are my babies not safe?” She looks behind her.

“They are perfectly safe. I have extra precautions in place until I can search for the tear in the ward.”

“Theres a tear in the wards?!” Her hand flutters to her mouth. “But?—”

“I have my best griffins and Hellhounds on it.”

Emily’s heart pounds so loud I can hear it.

“I’m sorry I scared you. There’s nothing to worry about. At least not that I know of. But if you have another resident when Beau eventually moves out, please be sure to check their permit.”

“Why would I though?”

“You’re supposed to? Randy was supposed to.” My fingers itch to pinch the bridge of my nose again.

“The permit is for the council to know who is here. The residents don’t need to nor care.”

My jaw twitches, and I take a deep breath. “I know you’re right. I’m just frustrated at the situation. Beau’s been without extra protection this entire time, which means your children could have been in danger.”

Her eyes go wide and I hold up my hand. “You’re safe now, though.”

“Do I need to remove BB from my house? Will his presence?—”

“You’re safe. I think Beau and Sparkle would be heartbroken if you kicked Beau out.”

“But if?—”

“Nothing’s happened in three months, correct?” Not that I think it matters. If someone followed him in, they probably would have taken him already.

“Yes.” Emily nods, and she seems to calm. A clap of thunder rings out making her jump.

“I think you’re okay. But I do have a Hellhound specifically watching your house until I get the tear taken care of.”

Emily nods. “We trust the council to take care of us.”

“Thank you. I do ask that you keep this under wraps and to let me know if you hear anything.”

She nods again. “Yes, sir.”

“Thank you.” Finally, I teleport to the one person I never thought I would, but I need her advice.

Cordia, the born witch that ruled Hex after her sons and husband, all perished one after the other. She gave up the leadership after messing with her grandson’s memory.

Of all the chaos I created to bring in love, the one pair I regret how everything went down aside from my original curse bringer is my crossroads demon Warwick and the born witch Ethan.

Yes, I set them up, but I never thought Cordia would rip Ethan away from Wick. I begged and pleaded with her to release the boy, but she refused every time. But... she led Hex the longest and the only former leader still alive.

I knock on the door again grateful for a roof on the porch.

“Poe?” Cordia opens her door and looks around. “Is everything okay?”

“I have a situation that I’m trying to understand before I take it to the entire council and I hoped you’d have some advice.”

She takes a step back and sweeps her arm down the hall. “By all means, I’m happy to help if I can.”

“Thanks.” I follow her to a sitting room off the side of the foyer.

“Tell me the situation. Oh! Would you like refreshments?”

“No, I’m good, but thank you.” I launch into Beau’s situation and she listens intently.

“Why don’t you want to go straight to the council with this?”

I throw my head back. “Because I was an ass yesterday and shot down concerns over the wards. I check them every day and I have no idea how there’s a tear.”

“There are always micro tears in wards, most can’t see or find them and everything is all peachy forever. However, Beau used echolocation. He found a tear you’d never know about to begin with. It’s nothing to beat yourself up over.”

“I’m more concerned about whether anyone followed him through. And why the hell didn’t the wards alert me that someone new came in?” I ball my fists. The wards

should have alerted me.

“Because, a shifter, or demon, or witch, in need, the wards don’t alert for. It’s a safety mechanism just in case.”

“Oh.”

Cordia taps her temple.

“Then why the fuck did you start the registration process? I thought that was for safety as well. To make sure everyone has what they need.”

“That was the gist of it yes. However, wouldn’t it be easier to have the townsfolk just tell you what they need?”

“But nephilims and bat shifters need extra security.”

“They do.” Cordia shrugs. “But our wards have been strong enough for decades to keep out the most nefarious of threats, don’t you think?” She grimaces. “Let’s just not think about my sons or husband.”

I snort. “So you’re saying we should drop the registrations all together?”

“Perhaps. Set it to a vote during the next council meeting or next town hall. See what the people think.”

I nod. “I still feel we need the extra precautions for Beau, like we did for Gabe.”

“I agree. At least until you can find the tear in the ward and see if it’s in need of true repair or it’s a natural micro tear you don’t need to worry about. But don’t touch it until these storms blow through. You might expose the entire town if you mess with

the wards during such strong energy.”

“That’s the plan. I have no desire to get electrocuted.”

“Good man. Is there anything else on your mind?” She lifts her brows.

“Not that I can think of at the moment, no.”

“Well, don’t hesitate to call on me. I’m happy to help whenever I can.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Being in charge? No. I thought I would, but I love being free from all those decisions.”

I nod. “It must be nice.” I hope the bitterness in my voice doesn’t come through, but the sympathetic look she gives me tells me she understands my plight more than most. “Thanks for this.” Before she can say anything else, I teleport to the council building.

Despite what Cordia says, I still register Beau, just in case everyone votes to keep doing it. I don’t want him to have to go through the trouble of it later. I grab his Proud To Be A Hexer pin and goody bag for new residents. I grab him extra candy and throw it in the bag, too.

Before I leave for home, I settle back into my desk and flip open my laptop. There’s a bat shifter colony in West Virginia that I have to wonder if Beau’s a part of, and if so, can I reunite him with his people? I just don’t have the contact number. I open NightFall, the search engine for us paranormals. About a decade ago, witches from Hellion, Illinois created it specifically for paranormals. If you’re purely human, the search engine won’t work without permission and a spell. I type in Bat Colony West

Virginia and wait. Sometimes it takes a while for the magic to search out answers, but not today. In about three seconds, I have an answer and dial the number.

The phone rings and rings and rings and rings until it disconnects. My heart sinks until an email address pops up. I copy and paste the info, then type out a short email and hit send. With that done, I pop back home.

I stand in the foyer and listen for chatter, but there's none until I make it to my bedroom and I hear a movie playing in the basement. I added the slide years ago to add a bit of whimsy to my life, but I teleport instead.

Beau, Sparkle, and Creamsicle are all curled together, asleep, as the projector continues to play whatever movie they were watching.

Creamsicle notices me first and phurmphs as she stretches in Beau's lap.

"Mmmm?" Beau says as his eyes flutter open. "Poe," he whispers.

BEAU

My chest goes fuzzy when I notice Poe's back. He's grinning at the three of us.

"That looks like such a comfortable cuddle pile."

"It is," Sparkle says, as he pulls me closer. I'm sure he's doing it to rile Poe up, and I think it's working. Poe's eyes narrow on the cat shifter and Sparkle just smirks at the demon.

Creamsicle stretches and hops off my lap to weave between Poe's legs. He bends to scratch her chin and Sparkle watches, fascinated.

I lean in to him. "Poe loves his kitty cat."

Poe snorts as he straightens again. "She's the best." He holds out a bag to me. "Welcome officially to Hex, Beau. I hope you love it here."

I take his offering and peek inside.

"I threw in extra candy." Poe's face flushes pink. "I know how you like treats."

"Ugh, you two are fucking adorable," Sparkle says as he pushes my shoulder.

Poe runs a hand through his hair and looks away. "I just wanted him to have?—"

Sparkle cocks his brow. "Your house is equipped with everything imaginable except

for sweets from Warwick's Wicked Bakery." He crosses his arms. "And why is that?"

"I just haven't made it over there this week."

Sparkle screws up his lips. "Okay, I'll let it slide. But I've already called dibs on taking BB to Wick's first."

Poe snorts. "Yes, sir."

"Ew, no, I'm the one that says that." Sparkle sticks out his tongue and fakes a gag.

Poe's brow lifts and they seem to have some silent conversation I don't understand.

"Shit! What time is it?" Sparkle pulls his phone from his pocket. His hand flutters to his chest. "Thank fuck it's not so late. I still need to help mama with the kids, then get ready for my shift." He turns to me. "There's a lap dance and Sex On The Beach with your name on it if you wanna come visit me?" He bats his lashes and winks at Poe when he growls. "Don't worry, you can get on that action, too. But you need to drop me off at home before my mom starts to wonder if I ran away." He turns to me and we hug. "Poe is so smitten," he whispers, making my cheeks heat. When he pulls away, he takes Poe's hand and I have to wonder if the demon heard Sparkle's words.

Poe's back before I can get the blankets folded again.

"You can leave those. My cleaning staff will wash them up for next time."

"I don't want to leave a mess." I grab my goodie bag and clutch it to my chest. I don't know how he knew what some of my favorite candies are, but he did. "And thank you for registering me and the goodies."

He nods and I take his hand. Before I can even blink, we're in his bedroom again.

"How about we try a round of exposure therapy tonight? Something short. One minute tops and we build from there. What do you say?"

I lick my lips as I think. "Just one minute?"

"Yep. One minute."

"I haven't even handled thirty seconds this week."

"And that's okay. If you want to talk to someone?—"

"What would I say to them? I've told you everything. I do have a few coping skills and sometimes they work, but not in the summer. Not in the season it all happened."

"Oh, Beau." He opens his arms and I plow into him. Sparkle spoiled me with all the cuddling today.

"One minute," I mumble into his chest. "And maybe distract me? Sometimes that works."

His throat clicks when he swallows. "What kind of distraction?"

We both pull away and I can't look at him to make my suggestion. "I like grooming. Sometimes Sparkle will bring brushes and combs, and we'll groom each other for hours. He brushes my hair and I brush his tail until it's all silky and soft. Sometimes we go upstairs and brush all his siblings. It gets chaotic until everyone has a brush and everyone's brushing someone." Until I met Sparkle, I hadn't been properly socially groomed in so long. I missed it. Edward would brush my hair for a few minutes, but he'd get so tired and I felt bad asking him. I'd do it myself, but it's not

the same. Not at all.

“I have some brushes and combs.”

“I’m not saying it’ll help, but it might?”

“Is this your way of saying you want me to brush your hair?” Poe smooths a tendril behind my ear.

“Maybe?” I whisper. I stand taller and straighten my shoulders. “Where should we do this?”

“What about we dedicate one of the other guest rooms for this venture? It’ll be nice and cozy.”

“Okay.” I nod sharply, trying to hype myself up. “Stoplight system, guest bedroom. I want Berry and my blankie.”

Poe nods as if I don’t sound like a child. Insecurity twists in my tummy.

“Why don’t you put on something cozy and I’ll meet you three doors down?” He tips his head to the right.

“You wanna do this now?”

He shrugs. “Why not?”

I fidget, trying to come up with an excuse and come up empty. “Okay.” I scurry from his room and drop off my goodie bag before stripping down and pulling on my softest t-shirt that’s so big it goes past my knees. I throw on a pair of shorts for a little more coverage, even though I don’t care what Poe sees. He’s already seen me naked.

I grab Berry and my blankie and squeeze them close as I pad down the hall to meet Poe.

He's on his phone sitting on a huge bed.

"Are all the beds in this house big enough for giants?" That said, I'm a small guy, so even a full-sized bed is huge to me. I prefer my futon that I've made into a perfect nest for my human form.

He looks around and smiles. "I suppose so, but many demons are rather large, so it makes sense." There's a paddle brush on the bed and a comb.

My heart pounds. We're doing this.

"How about you take a seat in the chair?" Poe gestures to a chair covered in red velvet next to the bed.

I follow his direction, clinging to Berry and my blankie. "Okay. Okay." I whisper to myself. I hold my blankie up. "Can you tie this on the end of the post?" I point to the top of the poster bed. "That way I have someplace to hang if I need to." Of course I can hang from the curtain rods, but my blankie is familiar.

Poe takes my blanket and holds it with such care as he walks back to the bed. He ties one end and tugs on it for good measure. Next, he grabs the brush and walks back to me.

"Try to relax if you can."

A nervous laugh bubbles out from me.

"Shhhh, listen to the sound of my voice. And let me know if I'm doing this wrong."

My hands shake and tears rim my eyes.

“Take a deep breath through your nose for the count of four.”

I do as he says.

“And hold for four.” He drags the brush through my hair and I relax. “Out for four.”

He continues his instructions and I’m lost in his low deep voice and the perfect strokes of the brush. He’s lulling me into this and I know it, but I love that he’s so thoughtful to distract me. I don’t know how long we continue on and I wonder if he’s forgotten the plot. He’s supposed to make it storm. My eyes shut as I listen to his instructions. We’re up to the count of seven now.

I’m so relaxed it’s hard to keep my head up. I’m so focused on Poe’s voice that when a weight drops into my lap at the same time a clap of thunder rings out, I scream and flail, causing Creamsicle to jump and land on my thighs with claws out. I screech again from shock at the sharp kitty daggers digging into my skin as she pounces off me.

There’s a crash behind me and I push to my feet to find Poe had tripped back into a table. I rush to his side while he laughs and flops back.

“Are you okay?” I want to run my hands over him to make sure, but keep them to myself.

“Perfectly fine. Are you—” His eyes narrow on me. “You’re bleeding.” He pushes to his feet and lifts me in the air in a bridal carry. I yelp and wrap my arms around him.

“I’m okay.”

“You’re hurt.” He kicks open the attached bathroom. This one isn’t nearly as large as the one in my or Poe’s bedroom.

“It’s just a couple of scratches.”

Poe sets me down on the bathroom counter and frowns. “I knew she’d probably want to join us. I should have closed the door.” He rummages around in a cabinet and comes back with a washcloth. “Please forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. It was a...” I try to keep my mouth from twisting into a grin. “Perfect storm of events.”

Poe snorts and runs the water. “I should have closed the door. Next time I’ll remember.”

“Or next time maybe I can hold her? She might help.”

When the water is to Poe’s liking, he runs the washcloth under the stream, then rings it out. His hands are so strong I have to wonder if he’s ever torn washcloths apart from doing that. He lifts the washcloth and nods to my thighs, where thin streaks of blood pool down the sides. I nod and this demon drags the washcloth so gently across my skin I can barely feel the motion.

“Did you kiss a lot of boo boos for the kids in the creche?”

“Sometimes. The generation of kids from the mid-1800s were rambunctious.” He chuckles. “I named them after Greek deities. Then the Roman deities for the next generation. Then I started on with the zodiac. Trees. Finally, the last generation of new crossroads demons I named after southern Indiana counties because the numbers drastically dwindled down and Hex is the place in the human world I’d become fond of.”

“Did all crossroads demons grow up in the creche?”

“No. Only the ones...” He sighs and wets the washcloth again. “Only the ones where the parents didn’t want to raise their children. Most did, but every century found me with more and more demons to raise, so I opened the creche. It was a learning experience for all of us. I taught what I could and as the kids grew older, they helped me raise the younger ones. I did what I could, but I lied so much, too.”

“I don’t know how they can be mad at you for self-preservation.”

He moves to my other thigh in silence. When he rinses the washcloth, the water runs pink.

“Doesn’t look like you’ll need stitches.” He smirks and rubs a thumb over one of the scratches. The act is so intimate I want to grab a horn and pull him down to me. But I won’t. That’s what brave people do and I’m not that. “Why is your heart pounding so hard?” He lifts a hand and places it on my chest. I lean into him, dropping my head on his arm, soaking in his warmth.

“Because...I know what I need to do.”

“And what is that?” He tips my chin up.

“We should try again,” I whisper. Maybe I’m a little tiny bit brave.

“If that’s what you want?” He helps me from the counter and places me back on my feet.

“Yes. We didn’t really get to the storm part. I think we need to have a real go at it.”

“I might have gotten distracted brushing your hair and trying to relax you.”

“And that’s why Creamsicle scared me. I was so into it. I had my eyes closed, and it felt so good.”

“Okay, we’ll try again.”

I lead the way back to the room.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:02 am*

POE

What is this little shifter doing to me? I've always wanted someone to take care of, but I never pursued the idea because of who I am. Hookups were easy enough, people are okay with fucking someone they didn't deem worthy enough to get to know any further, but in my punishment I've even denied myself that.

I want to pamper Beau, and the thought of going through with exposure therapy actually worries me. I want to be the one to hold him and make him feel better, but I also feel it's my duty to help him over this hurdle and let him go.

He settles into the chair again.

Creamsicle watches us from the bed and Beau pats his lap. "Come on, you won't scare me this time."

Slowly Creamsicle hops off the bed and into his lap. Beau takes a deep breath. "I'm ready."

I retrieve the hairbrush.

"I think..." Beau presses his face to Creamsicle's fur a few moments before sitting back up. "I think we should go for three minutes."

"Are you sure?" He continues to surprise me.

"You'll stop if I say red, right?"

“Absolutely.”

He nods and pulls Creamsicle closer. “Let’s do this.”

I drag the brush along his hair. “Breathe Beau.”

He chuckles and slowly starts to pet Creamsicle who purrs in his lap.

I don’t let too much time pass before I start a low rumble of thunder. Beau immediately tenses.

The brush glides so smoothly through his hair. I let more thunder build until the poster bed shakes. His eyes dart to his blanket. His breaths come faster, but he’s not tapping out. I check my phone. It’s only been thirty seconds. His heart pounds and he cries out when I let the illusion of lightning brighten the sky.

Creamsicle rubs her head under his chin.

“You’re doing so well, sweetheart. Just a little longer.”

He starts to rock. “Ye—Yellow. Yellow. Yellow.”

One minute and forty-five seconds. Almost half way. I slow down the thunder and walk around the chair to kneel in front of him. He’s pale and shaking. Creamsicle gives me a sad look and I scratch her on the top of her soft head.

“Would you like to talk about it?” The thunder still rumbles softly around us.

“It’s scary, but there’s a key factor missing.” He nibbles his bottom lip and refuses to look at me.

“What is it sweetheart?”

“The atmosphere. The pressure of the storm squeezing me. Real storms feel like they’re choking me when I panic.”

I nod. “Hadn’t thought of that. I’m not sure I can do it, but let me try.”

I start to push to my feet, but he holds my hands. “Stay here?”

“Of course.” I shut my eyes and concentrate on bringing the feel of a real storm to the bedroom.

Beau squeaks the moment the pressure shifts. My eyes pop open. Moisture drenches the air. Beau shakes his head and grips the chair arms, digging his nails into the velvet.

“I’m here, Beau. I’m here.”

He nods in acknowledgement. I check my phone. Thirty seconds left.

“Not much longer, sweetheart. You’re doing so, so well.”

A sob rips from his throat and he curls up in the chair just as the time finishes.

I stop the storm and release the pressure, making him curl up tighter.

“Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.” He chants.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about. You lasted the entire three minutes.”

“I said yellow. I messed up.”

“What? No. I’m proud of you for calling yellow. We stopped the clock. You told me what you needed to, then I restarted where we were. You did fabulous.”

He opens one eye. “Really? I did okay?”

“Yeah, you did amazing.” I want to hug him so badly.

“Then... then I deserve a treat. Right?” Slowly he uncurls from his position.

“Anything you want.” I’d steal a piece of the moon if he wanted it.

He looks down, then back up. “I think I’d like to go to Flutter and Fangs. I keep shooting Sparkle down because I don’t want to go alone and the only other person I’d know would be him and he’d be working.”

That’s not at all what I was expecting. “Sounds perfect. It’ll surprise the fuck out of Sparkle, too.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be okay? It’s storming in Hex, and there will be that whole atmosphere, even inside.”

He looks down again. “That’s another reason. I should be distracted, right? It shouldn’t be so bad. Maybe.” He goes back to petting Creamsicle. “Or is that whole idea ridiculous? Should we wait until after the storms pass?”

“I’m happy to take you and you decide. If you want to shout red to the rooftops, I’ll bring you right back.”

“Okay. I need to put on a better outfit.” He looks down at himself and grimaces.

“I should probably change, too. This isn’t exactly club attire.”

“You always look good.” His cheeks grow pink and he looks away from me again. He’s just too cute.

“Meet you in the hall in ten?”

“Sounds good!” He grins at me and keeps Creamsicle in his arms as he climbs from the chair and heads to his room.

“We can’t take Creamsicle.”

“She’s going to help me decide on an outfit. Sparkle probably packed me something good.”

I have to wonder what the cat shifter snuck into the bag.

When I meet Beau in the hallway, he's swiping his hair from his eyes. There's a bit of glitter on his cheeks and in his tresses. He's in a bright purple crop top, black fishnets with a pair of black shorts over them. He looks less shy than before and stands tall.

"You need some boots."

He frowns at his sneakers. "I know, but I'm happy with these." He wiggles his white shoe. "I can walk in them. Have I told you how much I hate shoes?" He shivers and makes a face that’s more cute than annoyed.

I hold out my hand. "Ready?"

"Yep!" He places his tiny hand in mine.

Like usual, the transport is a blink, and we're right inside Flutter and Fangs.

Beau stiffens, and his jaw tightens. His nostrils flair. His hand turns clammy.

I bend to whisper in his ear. "You're doing so well. Would you like to go up to the bar?"

Sparkle and Gabe are both smiling and making drinks for the crowd. There are a lot more people than I expected to be here.

Beau nods and squeezes my hand, but doesn't let go.

"BB!" Sparkle squeals when he notices us. He hops over the counter, making a few people grumble about losing their bartender. "I won't be long," he flirts and finger waves. He pulls Beau into a hug. "I can't believe you're here!"

"I was good and got a reward."

Sparkle cocks his brow and leans in to whisper, "I would have asked for a kiss if I were you." He winks and sashays back to the bar. He swings himself back over the countertop and gets back to work with a wink and a smile.

Beau swallows and looks up at me, then back to Sparkle. Would I give him a kiss if he asked?

Yes. Yes, I absolutely would.

He squeezes my hand and starts for the bar.

BEAU

F lutter and Fangs is loud even with my headphones on. There's a stage with poles and lights bounce around everywhere. Sparkle appears so happy behind the bar, chatting with people. He's always chatty and always nice. The dark-haired person next to him looks so familiar.

I tug Poe's hand, and he leans down to me. "They look like that lady that told me about Hex." They have black wavy shoulder length hair and brown eyes.

"That's Gabe, her son. He's a nephilim since his dad was human and his mom is an angel."

"I'm supposed to meet him!" We're at the bar and Gabe turns to us.

"You're supposed to meet me?" He looks up at Poe with a questioning look.

Poe chuckles. "This is Beau. Your mother is supposed to give me a heads up when she tells someone about Hex. That's why you had a welcome party when you arrived and I had no idea Beau's been here for three months. Gabrielle is slacking."

Poe presses me forward from the small of my back. I love the feel of his warm palm against my bare skin. I want him to touch me everywhere.

"Wait, did your mom name you after herself?" I hop onto one of the empty barstools.

Gabe laughs, and I swear there's a halo around his head. "Sure did. I go by Gabe, but

my name's Gabriel, too. And when it comes to my mother, no one can control her. I've only met her a few times in my life."

"Oh, I'm sorry." My shoulders slump.

"Don't be. Hex is the best place on Earth. I can be who I'm meant to be, and it's safe here."

"I love it, too."

Sparkle finishes his last round of drinks and turns our way. "Two Sex On The Beaches coming right up."

Poe squeezes my shoulder. "Have you had alcohol before?"

I shake my head. "Never had an ID before. Um, I still don't." I squirm in my chair. There's a lot I've never done aside from drinking alcohol. Never driven, but why would I? Never been kissed. Never went to school. Never?—

Gabe waves a dismissive hand. "A few months ago, the witches put a spell on this place. You can't enter unless you're at least twenty-one. Some of the underage academy and university students kept trying to get in, so that nipped that problem."

"Smart," I say.

Sparkle's back with two glasses. "I didn't make them too strong, I don't think, but let me know."

The glasses have little pink paper umbrellas and curly straws. "This is so cute!" I grab the one closest to me and suck hard on the straw before the drink hits my tongue. My eyes widen as the sweet flavor flows in my mouth. I hum as I drink. "So good," I say

around the straw.

“And that’s why I’m the master of the drink.”

Gabe rolls his eyes. “One day we’ll need to have a drink battle to see.”

“Oh, you are on!” Sparkle smacks the counter and the two laugh. He drops his chin into his hands and stares at me. “You came on a good night. The whole gang’s here. Lark is gonna perform a little later. He’s always fun with his illusions and glowy wings.”

“He’s the Fae?” I ask.

“Yep,” Gabe says. “But you should have come tomorrow for Sparkle’s vision.”

“Maybe we can come back.” I spin in the chair to face Poe.

“I’m agreeable to that.” He takes a sip of his drink and his eyes shut. “Beau’s right, this is delicious.”

“Don’t drink too fast,” Sparkle says to me. “You two should go find a seat before all the good ones get taken. The blue table tops have the best views, or the VIP couches. Looks like Frankie’s claimed one of the couches.”

“Frankie?”

“Pike and Lark’s beloved Hellhound.” Gabe nods to the couch on the far wall where a Doberman with blue flames sits as if they own the place. “She’s harmless and loves pets.”

“Can we?” I lean back and look up at Poe, who nods.

“Of course.”

Sparkle shoves a couple of water bottles at us. “Don’t get dehydrated.” When I take the bottles, Poe grabs my drink from the counter and leads the way to the couch.

Frankie sits at attention, watching our every move.

“Hi, I’m Beau.” I hold out my hand. Dogs in the human realm generally don’t bother me, so I’m hoping it’s the same with a Hellhound.

She sniffs my hand, then noses it and adjusts so we can sit. She lays her big head across my lap and I giggle. “I think I’ve been accepted.”

“Looks like.” Poe pets her head and slides in next to me. I soak in his heat and want to snuggle closer, but keep to myself.

The lights brighten before someone talks on a speaker. “Get settled in for a wild time because we have an amazing show for you tonight.” Music blares louder, making my head rattle. With the pressure of the storm raging outside, the music makes the uncomfortable sensation worse. Too loud. Way way too loud for me.

I squeeze my eyes shut and take a drink of the sweet treat. Frankie’s weight in my lap and Poe pressed into my side are the only reasons I’m not panicking, but I’m not sure how long I can keep that static of terror from rising higher to the surface.

Poe wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me closer. “What’s wrong, sweetheart? You tensed up as soon as—” He stops to look around. “The music? Or the lighting?”

“The music’s so loud,” I whisper. My hand trembles as I pet Frankie.

“What’s your color?”

I nibble on my straw, contemplating. I'm not to the point of shifting and I know if I can just breathe through it, I'll be fine. "Yellow, I think?"

"Do you wanna go someplace more quiet?"

I shake my head. "I'd like to see the show."

"If you change your mind."

"I'll say red."

He smooths his hand along my back. "Perfect." He relaxes a little, leaning back and spreading his legs. I wish I could be so carefree and comfortable.

Frankie nudges me with her nose to start petting her again, and I snort. "You're such a good girl. Thank you."

"Put your hands together for Kristy, our lovely local succubus!" Someone from a speaker says. "She's ready to shake up the night."

The lights flash all around the stage and a woman with dark brown skin sashays from behind a glittery curtain. Her long, braided hair goes down her back. She's in a pair of glittering white booty shorts and a top to match. Small wings pop from her back and I gasp at the sound. She smiles at the crowd and dances to the music before swinging from the center pole.

I forget to be afraid for who knows how long. Four performers have all danced on stage. There's been a few catcalls and I just don't understand because I'm mesmerized by the feats the dancers perform. Dazzled by their glittery costumes.

"Tonight, we have a special treat. Lark's giving us a rare show of wings and illusions.

Sit back, relax, and enjoy!”

A guy as pale as I am comes from behind the curtain. His bubblegum pink hair flows all around him. It’s so pretty I want to play with it. He waves as people cheer him on.

He sits on the edge of the stage and waves his hands around. I lean closer. Slowly, flowers bloom all around him until he’s seated among a garden of flowers I’ve never seen before.

“Fae wild flowers,” Poe whispers.

“They’re so pretty.”

Lark continues to weave his Fae magic, making the flowers grow until he stands beneath their giant heads. He walks through the stems. His wings start to glow and I suck in a breath as he flies in intricate patterns in the garden. My back itches, wings wanting free. I’ve never seen such artistry before in my life. Lark is so graceful in his flight. Tears spring to my eyes at the emotions he displays.

“Beau?” Poe whispers my name.

“Green. So beautiful.”

Soon Lark’s show is over, and the flowers disappear to the sound of applause.

“Alrighty, folks, shows over, but the night’s still young!” the invisible speaker says just before loud music blares again.

I scrunch my eyes closed and concentrate on staying in this happy, floaty place where giant flowers bloom.

When I open my eyes again, Sparkle's swaying his hips as he comes our way. I grin so wide.

"I promised you a lap dance." Sparkle turns around and shakes his bottom as he bends over, making me laugh when he looks back and winks. He does have a nice ass, but as cute as Sparkle is, he's not my type.

Beside me Poe growls, making Sparkle and I both turn pink. Heat drops over my head and my dick perks to life.

"Awe, is Poe jealous?" Sparkle's tail grazes across Poe's chin.

"No!"

Sparkle continues to shake his booty in my face and raises his hands to add some more hip action to his moves. He's so graceful, I wish I could dance like him.

"Yellow," Poe grits out.

I blink over to him and Sparkle sucks in a breath as he turns to face us. He stands stark still, other than his trembling tail.

"Wait, you really are jealous."

"I'm not," Poe grits out, but he's gripping the arm of the couch so hard if he doesn't watch it, he'll rip the fabric.

Sparkle side-eyes him. "Sure. I'm just gonna." He thumbs behind him and sprints back to the bar.

"Are you okay?" I whisper, knowing he'll still hear me despite the loud music.

“Yes. I’m okay.” He swipes hair from his face and looks away from me. “I’m better than this. I’m not jealous of Sparkle. Sorry for ruining your fun.”

“You didn’t ruin it. I’m still having fun.” The most naughtiest thought comes to my head. I nibble my bottom lip. Then climb into his lap.

POE

“W hat are you doing, little sweetie?”

Beau looks up at me and blinks with the confidence of someone that let his impulsive thoughts win and has no idea what to do now. I want to pull that abused bottom lip from his teeth, but I doubt he'd appreciate me putting my fingers in his mouth.

“Dunno, but felt right.” Beau shrugs and wiggles in my lap. My lap which spreads his legs wide and his cock strains against those little shorts. His eyes go wide. “Oh! But I should have asked first.” He starts to slide off and I drop my hands to his hips to hold him in place.

“Don't move.”

Beau shivers and nods. “Feel better?”

“Much.” There's something about his slight weight in my lap that soothes away everything . Just like when we slept last night with him in my arms. It's like all wrongs are righted. I want to keep him with me always, but he can't stay cooped up in my house in the demon realm. He needs to fly, and that's why when the storms are over, I have to let him go. But until then, I can claim him, right?

Beau's hands press to my shoulders as his eyes take me in. “Are your horns sensitive?”

“Very.”

“Oh.” He looks away even brighter.

“You can touch,” I offer. “No one around here will care.”

He leans in to whisper, “I want to lick them.”

I swallow. That wasn’t the response I was expecting. Neither is him lifting in my lap to flick his tongue over the tip of my left horn. My heart pounds and when he does it again to my right horn, he lingers. A moan escapes and my eyes flutter shut. I hold him closer and his hard dick presses against my stomach.

One of our phones buzzes, but I can’t tell which one it is. He wiggles in my lap and I’m not sure he notices. My hand goes to the small of his back.

“Let’s go back to my place, sweet. You can explore my horns better there.” I hadn’t realized how much he would affect me.

He nods, and in a blink we’re in my living room. Where it’s nice and dim, and fairly quiet. Tension I hadn’t noticed before leaves his body.

“Better?” we ask at the same time, making him giggle and press his face to my chest.

“Thanks for taking me,” he says.

“Anytime.” I can’t help it and brush the stray hair from his face. His hair is always flopping into his eyes, and it’s both endearing and frustrating. I want to always see his eyes.

Beau draws little shapes across my chest and looks away from me. “Sparkle’s a good dancer.”

“Maybe too good,” I grind out.

“Why did you call yellow?” Beau asks so softly I strain to hear it.

I take a long breath. “I didn’t like the jealousy coming to the surface. Yeah, I lied. I kind of wanted to rip the pretty kitty cat apart.”

“You can’t do that.” His fingers stop their explorations of my chest.

“Never. I promise. I didn’t think a lap dance between friends would bother me, but apparently I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Beau rubs his head along my chest. “Of course.” He snorts before giggling again. “The growling was really hot.” He fans himself and leans in again. “You got me so hard.”

“I noticed. Should we do something about it?” I want to kiss him, but Beau needs to be the one to direct this.

He lifts a shoulder. “Maybe? But I wanna play with your horns some more. How sensitive are they?”

“Do it just right and you’ll make me come.”

“Can I make you come?” He goes back to nibbling his bottom lip. “Sorry, that was—” He starts to slide off again, but once more, I hold him to me.

“Only if I can kiss you first.” The words are out before I can even process what I’ve said.

“I’ve never been kissed.” He presses his fingers to his lips.

I can't help the grin. "And you've made a demon come just playing his horns?"

He laughs. "No. No. I've never done anything other than playing with my toys." His head goes down. "But I don't think I'm ready for..." He waves his hand. "Anal stuff." He's so red.

I tip his chin so he looks at me again. "That's okay. You don't have to ever do anal and anyone that pressures you into it is an asshole."

He snorts at that. "That's what Sparkle says, too. But?—"

"No buts. Never let anyone pressure you into anything. Promise me." I may not be what his heart truly wants, but I'll treat him right as long as I have him.

"Promise." He tips his head. "How do you kiss? I mean, obviously besides smashing our lips together."

I grimace. "We do not smash our lips." That might hurt him, and I'd rather jump off a building without my wings. "Okay, actually, sometimes it is a smash, but that's not how I like to do it."

"Show me." He leans in, pursing his lips together and he's so adorably ridiculous looking that my laugh bubbles out without permission.

"What'd I do?"

"Relax." I cup the back of his head, and he melts into the touch with a happy little sigh. "You like being touched."

"So so much."

I thumb his bottom lip, lingering with my touch. “Do what feels good.” We stare into each other’s eyes and I get lost, forgetting what I’m supposed to do. So many emotions flicker through those windows to his soul.

“Kiss me, Poe.”

And I do. My first kiss in centuries and it’s the sweetest I’ve ever had. Beau’s mouth still tastes like his drink. He clings to me, hands fisting into my shirt. I want him closer and pull him in as tight as I can. Slowly, our mouths open. His tongue brushes against mine before he gasps and pulls away.

That endearing red is back in his cheeks and flushes down his neck. “I got nervous.” He laughs and I rub my thumb over his cheek.

“That’s okay. How was it?” Hoping he enjoyed himself as much as I did.

He sighs contently again. “Lovely. Better than I ever imagined. I liked it a lot . Maybe we should do it again? For experimental purposes. Did you like it?”

“More than you know. We can do it again just because we liked it.”

He reaches for a horn and I moan when he pulls me down to him.

His eyes darken. Our lips collide, and this time it’s more. There’s passion. He’s less shy and when our mouths open, his tongue seeks mine out. He giggles, but doesn’t stop the kiss and I shift him in my lap for better reach. His hand squeezes my horn, making my cock harder. I’m not ready to end the kiss when he pulls back. I trail after him and nibble his jaw, his throat.

Beau’s hips buck as he holds on to my horn while I kiss his skin over and over. One clavicle, then the other. But it’s the whimpers when I nibble at his ear that get me.

“You keep moaning like that, sweetheart, and I’ll come in my pants.”

“Everything feels so good, Poe. Don’t stop. Please, don’t stop.” He leans back as if to offer himself to me, making his crop top rise.

“I think this needs to go.” I tug the shirt off him with his help. Those pretty nipples are pebbled nubs and there’s no way I can keep my lips from them. Keeping eye contact, I flick my tongue across one. He cries out and clings to both of my horns.

Fuck . Beau is going to be the death of me. If I can’t capture his heart, his love, there’s no way I can go on. He’s everything I’ve ever dreamed of in a partner and I think he’s someone that can accept all my flaws even if I can’t.

Beau writhes as I kiss across his chest and down to his stomach. His erection is still trapped in his shorts, but neither of us moves to free him. There’s something fully erotic with us both still contained. His eyes flutter closed and I think he’s lost to sensation, other than his hands that work my horns as if he’s done it a thousand times.

“Baby—”

His eyes shoot open and he gasps. “Fuck,” he whispers just before he laughs and throws a hand over his eyes. Cum leaks under his waistband.

Before I can think too much, I bend down to lick him clean. He’s tangy and salty, so delicious on my tongue I want to drink him in. His eyes are so wide and he trembles beneath me, sucking in huge breaths. One hand still clings to my horn and with a twist of his wrist, I shout, messing my own pants.

I press my forehead to his as we both breathe each other’s air.

“Haven’t done that in a while,” I say while we both come down from the high. It’s

been months since I've touched myself in pleasure. I'd even bought a toy from the human realm, but it hadn't appealed to me like I thought it would. What I needed was someone, not a something, and my own hand was never enough when I craved touch.

Beau's loose in my arms. His chest rises and falls so gently. It's the most relaxed I've seen him since we've met. He's so at peace I want to know how to keep him like this forever. In deed what has this little shifter done to me?

"It's funny a little bit." Beau pinches his thumb and forefinger together. "You've seen me naked and we've both... come, but I've never seen you naked."

"Hadn't thought of that. But we can remedy that if you'd like? We can hop in the shower?"

He nods. "I don't want to have to peel these shorts off with dried cum."

I hold him tight as I transport us to the bathroom. He drops to his feet, with me keeping him steady. We kick off our shoes and I strip for him, but before I can get my pants off, he hops into my arms and pulls me down for another kiss.

"I like the way your lips feel on mine," he says when he pulls away. I'm not sure he knows what his words do to me. I've been alone for so long. Felt alone for so long. I may be a demon, but I've always craved a sweet partner. One I can pepper with kisses and take care of. One I can see a future with. One that can see beyond my past. Beyond my fuck up.

He pulls off his shorts and stockings in one go, revealing he went commando to the club. The thought makes me hard again. When I tug my belt through the loops, he moans and his hands are right there, working the button, then the zipper.

Beau drops to his knees to pull my jeans from me, dragging my underwear with them.

His eyes go wide when my cock springs from its prison.

He licks his lips. “You’re very large. Sparkle?—”

I tug him back to his feet and press my lips to his, kissing away whatever he was about to say as we grind against each other.

I nip his ear, then lick the shell. “Maybe don’t bring up the cat when you’re looking at my dick.” There’s a laugh in my voice, so hopefully he knows I’m not mad.

Beau snorts. “He’s the only other person I can compare a dick in real life to and me and him are about the same size.”

Laughing, I pull us into the shower and turn on the water. It’s a blast of cold, leaving us shivering before the water heats. “Sorry about that, sweetheart.” I truly am. I always forget to let the water warm up before getting all the shower heads and jets going.

His teeth chatter as I work shampoo into his hair. He leans into me and moans when I massage his scalp. I may have broken the sexual tension, but I wasn’t ready for his perfect mouth on my cock.

“So sleepy,” he says quietly.

“Same. We’ll get washed up, then hop into bed.”

He faces me, but drops his gaze to the floor. “Can I sleep in your bed? I think it helped with my nightmares.”

“I’d love that.” We quickly finish our shower. Then I’m drying him with a big fluffy towel and he’s barely awake on his feet. I teleport us to my bedroom and I set him on

the edge of my bed before I go find Berry. Beau is curled on his side, so I position him under the covers, put Berry in his arms, and wrap them both in mine. It's not long before Creamsicle joins us and if I didn't know any better, I'd think I was in paradise. But I don't deserve paradise.

BEAU

I wake up from the best night of sleep in a long time. Poe's still asleep and so is Creamsicle. Poe is handsome even with his eyes closed. His lashes are so long and thick. His horns are so shiny.

I can't believe I made this sexy demon come with just my hands on his horns. I never had the horny teenager phase, but I imagine it awakening in me now, if that's possible. Poe shifts in his sleep and he pulls me in closer, not that I mind. I love being so close. I rub my head along his chest. His heart beat is such a lovely sound to me, I want to just listen to it all day. At least until all the sounds around me get to be too much.

Sometimes, even when I'm cozy, I get irritated when too much noise hits my ears. That's the one downside to living at the Boots's house. There are six children, Sparkle, and their mom. It's very loud until the kids go to bed, which can be a problem since I'm very nocturnal.

Poe's hand drags down my back. "I can hear you think, sweetheart. What's wrong?"

I press my nose to his chest and breathe. "Nothing. It's all just noise in my head."

He hugs me close before releasing. His morning wood tents the blanket and I swallow down nerves before saying, "Want some help with that?" I nod toward his dick.

Poe's eyes squeeze closed. He sighs as he pinches the bridge of his nose.

What's wrong? What have I done? I scramble back, making sure the blanket keeps me covered. Creamsicle harrumphs at me as she slinks off the bed.

"Beau," Poe starts. There's a pained look on his face that causes my stomach to drop. I don't like that look. What did I do?

"I'm sorry. Whatever I did. I'm so sorry ." Tears fill my eyes and I want to run away, but I'm stuck here until Poe takes me home. "I don't know what I did. Please tell me so?—"

"What? No. You didn't do anything. I'm the one that should be sorry." Poe gazes at the ceiling. "But I'm not."

"I—I don't understand. You have to spell this out for me Poe, because I thought we had a lot of fun last night. Now I'm worrying that I did something to upset you."

"No. No. It's really not you."

My heart shatters. The 'it's not you, it's me' that Sparkle warned me about. I gave Poe my first kiss. We came together. I would have given him even more.

"Beau, breathe for me." He holds my face in his hands. "I shouldn't have let things go as far as they did last night. I'm in a position of power and?—"

"I don't care. I like you. A lot . You're helping me with the storm problem and?—"

"But still?—"

"Are you ashamed of me?" I don't know that I want to hear the answer.

"No." He presses his forehead to mine. "I'm ashamed of how much I want you and

shouldn't."

"Why shouldn't you? Is it a demon thing?" I shake my head, knowing demons don't care if their partners are demons.

"It's complicated." He won't look at me.

Sparkle told me about the 'it's complicated' problem, too.

Neither of us say anything more. I slide down and off the bed. "I'm going to go get dressed." I grab Berry and race from Poe's bedroom.

Maybe he doesn't like morning activities. Maybe he wants to be the one in control. No, he let me lead last night. My steps falter. But he didn't let me touch him. He stalled, not letting me experience giving my first blowjob.

What have I done? I squeeze Berry to my chest and quickly scamper the last few feet to my borrowed room. I close the door and slide down it. I messed up. I was too forward. Poe isn't ready for anything more intimate than mutually coming. Am I ready for more? I bury my face into Berry and shake my head. What am I doing?

POE

What the fuck is wrong with me? Beau is freaking out in his bedroom, silently talking to his stuffed bat, or Sparkle, or himself. I can't tell which. I don't want him to think I'm taking advantage of him, or taking advantage of the situation. Last night I let my desire take over instead of using my head. Beau doesn't need this confusion and now I've essentially rejected him twice. I'm such a fool. He's practically throwing himself at me, and I stopped him. It was the right thing to do. If we weren't in this situation that I conjured up, he wouldn't be here.

The telltale energy of a demon teleporting shimmers beside my bed. I groan when Pike shows up with a very angry cat shifter standing next to him.

Pike holds up his hands and his tail shakes behind him. "Sorry, he insisted on talking with you."

Sparkle's green eyes glow, and he bears his fangs at me. "Where is he?! What the fuck did you do to him?!" He lashes out with claws instead of nails on his human hands. I turn just in time, giving the pair a flash of my ass before I get tangled in the sheets.

If I weren't so annoyed with myself about the whole situation, I'd probably laugh at him hissing at me. My respect for the cat shifter grows, he didn't even hesitate to show up here in my home. Beau needs people like this in his corner.

My bedroom door cracks open and Beau pads in. "Sparkle?"

“BB.” Sparkle visibly relaxes and runs to Beau’s side, pulling him into a hug, making me growl. Sparkle whips his head around to glare at me. “No! You do not get to growl at me.” He turns back to Beau. “Did he hurt you? You sounded so bad on the phone.” He wipes away Beau’s tears with his thumbs.

Beau shakes his head, and he’s pink again. “I—I messed up. He never hurt me.”

“He made you cry and for that, he needs to suffer.” Sparkle hisses again, making Beau snort.

Beau’s eyes go wide and he slaps a hand to his mouth. “No. No. It was my fault. I?—”

“You did nothing wrong,” I say. “It was all me.”

“But I tried to...” He scuffs his foot in the carpet. “I tried to... advance things, and you weren’t ready. I don’t think I’m ready.” He looks up at me. “But it felt so good. And sleeping in your arms. And it felt natural at the time. But I think you were right to stop things.” He nods. “Thank you.” He turns to Sparkle. “And I’m sorry for making you think you needed to come defend me.” His head drops. “Sorry, but thank you.”

Pike runs a hand through his dark hair and his mouth twitches as he watches the scene. “Sparkle, why don’t we?—”

“No, I’m staying right here until I know BB is good or I’m taking him home with me and banning Poe from my house. I’ll get a witch to make a spell or something.”

Beau pulls away. “You can’t. He’s a good person. I messed up. I shouldn’t have called you.”

“You can always call me.” Sparkle squeezes Beau’s arm. “Do you want to come back with me? I know it’s still storming, but?—”

I push to my elbows. “I’d like it if Beau stayed. He made progress last night with the storm therapy.”

Sparkle shoots me a glare. “I—We can help him at home where it’s really storming.”

Beau trembles, making Sparkle’s eyes widen.

“I think... if Poe is okay, I’d like to stay. I’m not ready for...” He drops his head and his voice. “The real world yet.”

“Okay,” Sparkle says. “But send me a text if you change your mind.”

“I will.” Beau nods.

Sparkle pulls him in for another hug, all the while glaring at me. I’m actually impressed with his dedication to his friend. Beau hasn’t had many people like that in his life. They part and Sparkle eyes me the entire time until he has Pike’s hand in his and they disappear.

“Sorry,” Beau says for what feels like the hundredth time this morning. “I didn’t think he showed up. I called him and started crying, and it scared him. Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry.” I pat the side of the bed.

He hesitates before taking comically tiny steps towards me. “But I am. I didn’t mean to try and get you to do something you didn’t want.”

I hold up a hand. “The problem is that I do want.”

“Why is that a problem?” Beau whispers as he plays with the hem of his t-shirt. It’s too big on him, like most of the others have been.

“I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of you.”

Beau’s brows scrunch adorably. “If anyone is taking advantage of anyone, it’s me.”

“I freely give my help, Beau. You’re not taking advantage.”

“Then doesn’t that mean you also aren’t taking advantage since I was freely giving myself to you?” Again he fiddles with his shirt.

He has a point. “But you said you weren’t ready?”

A tiny tip of his head. “Right. It’s—” He waves towards me. “Intimidating and I have no idea what I’d even do with it, anyway.” He blinks up at me with his pretty brown eyes. “But...” He licks his lips. “I wouldn’t mind figuring it out.”

His words make my dick perk up and I try to will it down. Despite this conversation, I still feel like he’s off limits, that I’d gone too far. But what if...

I tap my bottom lip, and he watches the movement. “Five dates.”

He blinks again, no doubt confused.

“I want to take you on dates. Get to know you better. Then we can reevaluate the whole intimacy thing.” Because I’m a coward and don’t want him to regret it if he gives me his virginity and I end up not being the Prince Charming he sees me as.

To my delight, his eyes light up and he sucks in a breath. “Yes! I love that.” He plows towards me and wraps me in a hug. “Randy texted me my schedule and I go back in

tomorrow night.”

“So soon?”

“Yep, the storms should clear up by midafternoon today and you can take me home or I can stay here until I have to go in?” He searches my face and I know what answer he wants.

“I’d like you to stay. We could do some more storm therapy, then I’ll take you right to work after you show me where you came in through the wards.”

He nibbles his bottom lip. “Thank you.” He does one of his endearing head rubs against my chest and I swear I melt. What is this sweetie doing to me?

BEAU

When we get back into Hex, the air still smells like rain, and my anxiety rises again. Poe and I went three stormy rounds at his house with increasing time and I only freaked out... okay, I panicked every time still, but I'll get there. Hopefully.

We stand near the edges of Hex. Poe's hand is on the small of my back and I lean into it. "Alright, little sweet, show me where the tear in the ward is, please."

Gladly. I don't bother stripping and simply shift into my bat. The magic shimmers in my mind during the transformation. I still remember my first shift, again panicking, but not the same as when it's a storm. Pop had to talk me through the sensations running rampage through my body. I didn't understand the heat or the sensation of my hands morphing into my wings.

I soar high into the sky as my clothes drift to the ground. I spin and play in the air while Poe watches me, but I have a job to do. Chirping out, I search for the tear that brought me inside Hex.

Poe's face scrunches the higher I go. Up and up and up. Until I hit the barrier of the ward, and there it is. Plan as day. It's bigger than before though.

Poe's right behind me, his demon wings so huge to carry his weight. They're magnificent, and a lot like my bat wings.

I chirp out again and find more tears. That's not right, it wasn't like this. But as I look for more, there's a cluster of a dozen or so rips in the dome and along the side of the

ward.

I spin around Poe before I bonk him in the head with mine—our signal to talk.

Poe holds out his arms, and I shift to fall into his embrace. Once he has me, I loop my arms around his neck. It's so cozy and intimate here, but I have a job to finish.

“There are so many now.” My heart flutters. Did I mess up the wards when I came through?

“I know what you're thinking. It wasn't your fault.” He rubs his nose to my cheek, making sure to keep his horns from slashing into my skin.

“But what if?—”

“Nope. There was already a tear. Honestly, I never think to check the dome. This is entirely on m?—”

Poe's gone and I'm falling through the air. My heart pounds through the terror of free falling as I fight my way back into a shift to keep from splattering on the ground.

I knew at any point someone could summon Poe, but to have his day interrupted must be irritating. I know I'd be annoyed if I was called away, not knowing when or where. Poe said he has dozens of crossroads all over the world, yet this is the first time someone's summoned him since I've been around.

I find my way back to my clothes and dress. We're close to the edges of the ward and something seems off. I chirp the best I can in my human form and notice how thin the barrier seems to be by a Welcome To Hex signpost. I squint at the sign. It's not exactly the same it was before, but I can't place my finger on what's wrong. I back away, not wanting to find out on my own.

Poe said there were Hellhounds and griffins watching over Hex right now. I just hope the feeling in my tummy is hunger and nerves and not Hex being invaded.

When I feel like I've passed the danger, I turn and run all the way to Hex Grocer. Poe needs to know what I've found.

I slide on the bench in the locker room and shoot Poe a text. My breath calms as I type out my message. I probably should have looked for one of those Hellhounds or a griffin to tell, too, but Poe is most important here.

My heart still pounds, but I'm early for my shift and take the few minutes to center myself like Poe taught me. In for a count of four, hold, and out for four.

I'm still terrified of storms, and now hoping my arrival didn't bring in something scary. But if it had, wouldn't they have already nabbed me by now? If bat shifters are such prized possessions, why wait?

Poe: Sorry about that, sweet. Got summoned. Then immediately called a meeting for the council.

Beau: Lots of luck with the council. I hope it goes okay.

Poe: Fingers, toes, and tail crossed.

I snort at the image of his tail curled. Actually, that's cute and my cheeks heat.

"Glad to have you back, kid," Randy says as he strolls in. "The king didn't do anything?—"

I hold up my hands. "He's so good to me."

Randy eyes me as he thinks over my words. “He didn’t hurt you, right?”

“No.” Only my pride a tiny bit and that was my own fault. I nibble my bottom lip. “Actually, we’re going on a date tomorrow.”

Randy’s jaw drops and his wolf ears twitch. “What? He’s terrifying. You’re too sweet for him. He’ll?—”

“Poe isn’t scary at all and never has been. He’s always been so nice to me and I’ve thought he was attractive since I was a teen. So this is a win-win for me.” I launch into when we first met and Randy’s eyes get wider.

“Never would have guessed.”

I shrug, not sure what to say, really. “I don’t like talking about my past. It hurts.” I rub my chest as if I can work out the pain deep in my heart.

Randy clamps a hand on my shoulder. “Well, I’m glad Poe’s treating you right. We missed you, though. You might be quiet, but you make these little happy sounds when you work.”

My eyes grow wide and I’m sure I’m bright red. “I do?”

“Yep, all the other night stockers said they missed it and I have to say, I did as well.” Randy laughs. “We like you, BB.”

“Beau,” I say softly. “Can... can you call me Beau from now on?”

“Sure thing.” He squeezes my shoulder again. “I’ll spread the word.”

“Thank you.” I don’t know why it’s so hard to tell people my true name, the one that

makes my heart happy. The name my parents gifted me and I've loved all my life. It felt like if everyone called me Beau, then it wasn't special anymore.

But when Poe calls me by my given name, my insides light up. It's as if magic flows through my veins and my parents are alive again. Beau, that's me. Not BB. BB is a scaredy cat. But Beau is trying to get past that. Moving on. Claiming my truth. Living .

Three days with the king of the crossroads demon I've been crushing on for almost a decade and I feel like I can take on the world. Even if I'm still terrified of storms and hate rain. Poe says it might get better, and he gave me the number of a therapist to talk to if I want. I plug the number into my phone, but my alarm goes off to start my shift. Maybe I'll brave it out and call later.

POE

“ I fucked up.” The words are past my lips now that I’ve told the council everything.

Trixie pushes to her feet. “Damn right you did. What if someone snuck in?”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Leo answers. “They have to know about Hex first. Otherwise, the magic doesn’t work.”

“I know,” Trixie says with a sigh. “Perhaps we need to speak with the covens? Make an entirely new barrier?”

That unsettles my stomach. “If something goes wrong, the entire town is exposed.”

“And right now we have stray shifters flying around, and who knows what else? Who else?”

I shiver at the thought. Necromancers know about the sanctuary towns, but so far none have been infiltrated. That’s not to say it’ll never happen, just that it hasn’t yet.

That said, as far as I know, Hex is the only sanctuary town with a nephilim and bat shifter now. Yet another reason we need residents registered so we can share the information between towns if we need to. Spread information for safety.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “We also need to discuss the registration process. If we’re doing a new barrier, then we need to know when everyone is coming in so we can register them and get them the resources they need. Beau had

none of that when he entered, and I wish we could have helped him from the beginning.”

Leo taps the table. “I still feel registration is important and I agree about changing the barrier. It’s old.”

Leo should have been the one in charge. If so, he probably would have had the tears repaired already and done a survey of the town to make sure he knew every face. That’s just how Leo is. I’m glad to have him on the council.

Trixie nods. “I agree with Leo.”

Everyone else in the room also agrees. They turn to me.

Leo stands and pounds on the table three times. “Now what do we do about Poe? He put Hex in danger by dismissing our concerns during the last meeting.”

The pounding of my heart floods out the rest of his words. His very true words. What the fuck have I done? I could have put everyone in jeopardy.

A knock at the door startles us all. Cordia glides in as if she owns the place.

“Sorry to interrupt.” She tips her head towards me. “I wanted to share some information in front of the council about the wards.”

Abigail waves towards a free chair, and Cordia takes her place as if she never stopped ruling Hex.

“As you’re aware, the wards are in need of repair, more than likely.” She continues with what she told me about micro tears and how there’s no way we would have known except for something like this happening.

The council visibly relaxes.

“In conclusion, Poe is not to blame and shame on you for thinking that way. Everyone on this council was voted in to protect Hex. Everyone has an equal hand in this. Poe may be your voice, but he’s not the king here .” She stabs her finger on the table.

Everyone squirms in their chair.

I swipe a hand over my face, thinking. “It was me that ended the meeting last time. I take responsibility for my actions.”

Cordia shakes her head. “That’s great, deary. But it’s not only on you.” She pats my hand. “That’s all I wanted to say. Have a good meeting. Toodles.” She finger waves at the council and I have to laugh because she picked that up from one of the freed crossroads demons. I just can’t think of which one.

We, the council of Hex, spend the entire day coordinating with the covens that call this town home. They are the backbone of our protection. Without them, Hex would cease to exist.

While I should be glad we’re getting things underway, all I can think about is Beau and where I’d like to take him on our date tomorrow night. The thought of him not being in my bed tonight irritates me. He hadn’t even had a place with me until the other day, but he already feels like he belongs next to me. My fingers itch to text him about the ward plans.

“We should take a break,” Leo says. “At least get some sustenance in us all.”

My stomach rumbles. I’d forgotten I hadn’t had anything to eat since breakfast and that was hours and hours and hours ago.

“I’ll put in a food order for pizza,” Trixie says as she pulls her phone from her pocket.

I stifle the groan. We probably need rest, but I won’t dare open my mouth to suggest it.

While everyone is trying to decide on dinner, I stand to stretch. Pacing the council room, I check my phone and my heart soars.

Beau: Sparkle is taking me to Warwick’s Wicked Bakery when I get off in the morning. Want me to pick you up anything?

I grin at my phone, reading the text over and over. He messaged me .

Poe: Enjoy yourself and tell me all about it when I see you tomorrow night.

Beau: Sounds good. Anything you think I should try?

Poe: Everything, obviously

Beau: I’ll do my best. I hope you’re having a good day.

“Uh, you okay over there?” Trixie asks, since I’m still grinning at my phone.

“I’m great.” I shove my phone into my pocket and join the table again, hoping this isn’t an all-nighter in the end.

It’s 3am when I finally plop into bed, too tired to shower or change out of my clothes. Creamsicle joins me before I shut my eyes. She chitters her disapproval at me and I pet her until she settles on my chest.

The covens will create a new ward, but it'll take a few weeks to gather the supplies. Weeks I'm grateful that we have a ward at all so it keeps everyone safe.

Everyone. From mean old Mr. Terrence, who's always wagging his cane at the kids, to chaotic Vanderburgh with his schemes to become the next king of the crossroads demons, to Lark, that calls Hex home more than the Fae lands, to Beau. I'm glad Hex is here for all of us as a safe haven.

Speaking of which, Hex feels more home to me than the demon realm does most days. I'd rather bask in the sun than feel the drone of magic just outside my house.

Of course, magic is great and all. I just want a life that's slower than being a king of anything. When I'm in the demon realm, I'm king of crossroads demons, which is a joke to most other demons, yet I'm still treated with respect. I rule over people and that scares them. They wrongly think they'll find the same fate as everyone that crossed my path before, so they stay away. But it's not like that in Hex. In Hex, no one knows the truth of the crossroads demons or me. One day that's going to bite me in the ass.

Despite being tired, it takes time for me to fall asleep listening to the content kitty purrs in my ears.

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:03 am*

BEAU

As soon as I leave the grocery, the morning light blinds me even with my sunglasses on. Thank goodness the scent of rain is clear. Heat already rises from the sidewalks and the humidity already sucks away my breath. But I'd take it over storms any day.

Sparkle claps as he bounces on his feet next to a bench. "Time to get our shopping on! Poe said I needed to take you to Renaud's too, for some sleep powder. That stuff is the best. Sometimes after the club I can't wind down and it knocks me the fuck out and I don't have any bad dreams. Love it."

"I never knew anything like that existed until Poe told me about it."

Sparkle loops his arm in mine and leads the way with a tiny skip in his step. "We're going to Wick's first though, so all the good stuff isn't taken. Oh, I hope Talon's there," his voice is all dreamy. "He's a sexy griffin shifter."

"I don't think I've met a griffin shifter, but Poe says they help protect Hex when needed."

"Oh, yeah. Griffins are awesome and terrifying, but not Talon. He's like a prickly kitty cat. Wren likes to antagonize him, actually I think we both have crushes on him."

I tip my head, trying to remember if I know someone named Wren. "Who's Wren?"

"That's Lark's older brother." Sparkle leans in and cups my ear. "He's a Fae

courtesan. I get all my sex tips from him.”

My mouth makes an O. “Like what?” I whisper. “Would he give me sex tips?” That way I know at least something when or if Poe and I ever get intimate after these dates. I’m glad he slowed things down. Sure, I’m in my twenties, but I’ve never been confident around others. If it weren’t for Sparkle, I probably would be a recluse, which would be a tragedy because Hex has so much to offer I’m discovering.

“I’m sure he would. Let me shoot him a text to see if he’s open. He’s been pretty busy. I’ll tell him we’re going to Wick’s, that’s sure to get his attention.”

“Because of the griffin?” I nod and pat his arm. “Thank you. I don’t know anything. Well, other than the videos you sent me and that was terrifying, by the way.”

Sparkle snorts, and his head goes back when he laughs. “What made them terrifying? Was it the dicks? I did send you to a protected paranormal porn site, so you’d have an idea of what different dicks look like.”

“No. No. Just the...” I search my brain for the right words. “I don’t know. Being naked doesn’t bother me, but being intimate kind of does when it’s past the kissing stage. I—I like what Poe and I did with our clothes on. It was fun, but I don’t know. I lied and told him I played with my toys, but I don’t. They’re still all in their packaging, too intimidating. How do you do it?”

Sparkle stops us and turns to face me, putting his hands on my shoulders. “I’m going to tell you something I’ve never told a soul since I started working at F&F. Well, other than Wren. You and Wren are the only people that know this.”

I swallow, this is huge for him.

“I’m still a virgin, too.”

“But that’s not a bad thing, right? Who cares that we’re a pair of virgins?”

“I have a reputation. Everyone thinks I sleep around. Wren plays along at the club, saying stuff like ‘I have a D appointment with the kitty cat,’ but all we’ve ever done is talk.”

“I don’t understand why it’s a secret?” What’s there to be embarrassed about?

“I want people to think I’m experienced. But I’m waiting for the right person.”

“Then why the sex lessons?” I tip my head, but I think I understand.

“So when I am ready, I know what the fuck I’m doing.” Sparkle laughs, and he takes my hand again. “I do practice blow jobs on my dildos.”

“I’m still afraid of them. Blow jobs and dildos.”

Sparkle shrugs. “They’re not for everyone.”

“Sparkle!” Someone that looks vaguely like Lark, but has long, stark white hair waves at us from the line that comes from the bakery. Their wings flutter a little at the bottom before they settle again against their back.

“Wren!” Sparkle wraps the Fae in a hug. “I want you to meet Beau.”

Wren bounces on his toes. “Oh! A bat shifter, how lovely. We have a colony not too far from the palace in the Fae lands.”

“How did you know what I am?”

Wren taps his temple. “Fae can usually sense shifter types.”

Sparkle snorts again and pushes Wren on the shoulder. “I told him about you.”

Wren’s lips twitch. “What can I help you with, friends? I hear my services are in need.”

My face burns hot. “I want to know how to please Poe.”

“Poe, king of the crossroads demons? That Poe?”

“Y—yes?”

Sparkle grins. “He’s got it bad and so does Poe. They’re so sickly cute together.”

Wren’s eyes light up and his wings flutter again. “Yes, Poe needs a cutie. He’s been so stressed since he joined the council.”

“He’s stressed?” Not that it’s really a surprise, he’s just so easy going with me.

“So stressed.” Wren pouts. “Oh, and don’t worry, I haven’t used my Fae wiles on him.” He wiggles his fingers as if to sprinkle fairy dust.

“It’d be fine if you had.” It’s none of my business, but Poe had said he hasn’t been with anyone since before he was cursed.

The line scoots up a few more people. The building is an unassuming brick. The front has a light blue awning with dark blue lettering. There are twinkling lights in the windows that bring in a happy energy.

“Why is it called Warwick’s Wicked Bakery? I understand the Warwick part, that’s his name. But what makes it Wicked?”

Sparkle shakes his head when he laughs. “He thought it sounded so cool. His beloved Ethan agreed with him and so the name stuck. We usually all just call it Wick’s, though.”

Wren rolls his eyes. “I tried to talk him out of it, like I tried to talk Pike out of naming the club Flutter and Fangs. It used to just be called Flutter, because of Lark. Which was a lovely name, but he added and Fangs.”

“So he can be a part of it, too?” I say.

“Yeah, but Flutter was a better name.” Wren flips his hair over his shoulder.

“Dunno, I like Flutter and Fangs.” I flap my arms like wings and bare my teeth, where my canines are fangs. Most people don’t notice, but when they do, they always ask if I’m a vampire bat, which I’m not.

Wren and Sparkle laugh at my antics, and my heart is so full. I have friends.

Inside Wick’s, I breathe in the delectable treats. I’m still way in back, by the door, but I’m inside now and I can tell why everyone loves it here. People chatter at the available tables. The coffee doesn’t overpower the scent of the pastries. The peaceful blue color calms my nerves.

“Oh, I hope they still have cream pies or creampuffs,” Sparkle says. He immediately goes red when Wren cackles. Legit cackles and clutches his stomach.

“I don’t get what’s so funny?” I say.

“I’ll send you a video,” Sparkle mumbles, but he’s laughing too, despite being so red.

I swear my nose guides me to the counter and when I’m finally able to order, there

are so many choices it boggles my mind.

The workers behind the counter don't seem to mind me examining every offering. There's a guy with wheat colored hair and a beard that Sparkle and Wren finger wave at and I have to guess that's Talon. He just rolls his eyes at the Fae and continues filling a bin with treats. A demon with blue skin comes in with a tray of fresh sweets.

"Two of those, please!" They look like cherry tarts, and they're right out of the backroom.

"Good choice," the demon says.

"That's Wick," Sparkle says.

The demon tips his head. "Hiya."

"I'm Beau and I'll be back!" Every day probably.

Wick chuckles as I pay and hurry after Sparkle and Wren. Wren grabs a table in a corner without anyone around it.

"You're cute, you know?" Wren says as he nibbles on a bear claw. He pats his mouth with a napkin between each bite.

"I've been told that. Poe says I'm adorable. Especially when I'm flustered." I sink my teeth into the cherry tart and moan. The crust is flakey and the cherries are bursts of flavor. I hold up a finger. "I need a moment."

The pair chuckle again as we eat a few more bites.

When I gain the courage, I say, "Like I said, I'd like to know how to pleasure Poe."

I swear the air vibrates with Wren's excitement. "And I'd love to teach you. But we can't do it here. Let's go to Flutter and Fangs when we're done, and I'll show you a few tricks to play with."

"Thank you."

"No need for that. I thrive on teaching about pleasure." His shoulders drop. "Even if I'm ready to retire."

Sparkle squeezes his arm. "You know you have my support."

Wren nods. "I just need the royals to release me from the contract."

"How long is the contract?" I ask.

"Thirteen hundred years."

My mouth drops open. "That is a long, long time."

"Yeah, and I'm only a little over a decade through it. Mother is about halfway through her contract, but she loves the job. I did it because I thought I had to. Lark started his training before he was snatched up. It took permits to learn how to teleport through the realms to find him." He puts his head in his hands. "I'm so glad he's safe now and has someone that adores him. But..."

"It's your time," Sparkle says. "I get it. I've always helped mama with my siblings, but I'm ready for it to be my time. I don't see that happening for a few more years. At least not until the youngest ones get older. Don't get me wrong, I adore these kittens, but I want to live on my own and find my own way, you know?"

Wren and I pat Sparkle on his back.

“I’m sorry.” I stuff my mouth with the tart, so I don’t have to talk immediately.

“What’s your story?” Wren asks. I like him, and I love Sparkle and Sparkle trusts him, so I can trust him too. I launch into the story of my life. The death of my parents, Edward, being alone after Edward’s death, how I knew Poe as a teen, and wrap it up with what’s going on currently.

The two blink back at me, mouths hanging open or treats poised to their lips and forgotten.

“Fuck,” Wren starts. “And I thought I had trauma.”

“I’m working through it.” I take another bite. “These are so good.”

“How?” Wren starts. “Just how are you so sweet? I would have turned jaded. I have turned jaded,” Wren says. He waves his hands around. “Only those I’m closest to know I’m faking it most of the time. But you , you’re genuinely happy?”

I nod. “Unless it’s storming or raining. Or I’m trying to sleep.” Another bite. “I have nightmares every night.” Unless I’m in Poe’s bed, apparently.

“We need to get you some sleep powder,” Sparkle says. “It’ll help a lot.”

“So would a therapist. At least that’s what I hear,” Wren says.

“Uhm,” I start in on my second tart. “Let’s not compare traumas. We’ve all gone through stuff, right? It molds us into who we are. And we’re great. Right?”

“Super great.” Sparkle wipes his hands on a napkin. “Now let’s go learn about blow jobs.”

BEAU

I 'd only ever teleported with Poe. Wren's teleporting is different and my stomach sloshes around once we end up on the Flutter and Fangs dance stage.

"Sorry about that. It was a little rough with two of you." Wren wipes his hands on the front of his shirt and his wings flip out as if to whip away water. "Have a seat anywhere." He waves an elegant hand around.

Sparkle and I plop on the stage in front of him.

There's a pole behind Wren and Sparkle knocks me in the shoulder with his. "Maybe after bj lessons I'll show you a few moves on the pole."

"Why not? I keep trying new things and this could be fun."

Sparkle squeals and kicks his legs. "Yes!" He punches the air and pulls me into a hug. "Stick with us, we'll steer you towards fun. Oh! Gabe started a crochet circle. Or is it a knitting club? I never remember. But he makes the best scarfs in Hex. Always uses the softest yarn."

"I could make my own cozy blankie." The idea lights me up. "Yeah! I'd like that." I could add another new friend. We may have met briefly at F&F, but we could be friends!

Wren watches us and slides down to lean against the pole. "I want that. Excitement. The most exciting times for me is when I get to come to Hex. Not because my brother

is here, but because there's not stuffy Fae court rules to deal with. I can just be me, and if I want to be a jaded miserable Fae I can."

Sparkle fakes a pout. "But you're never miserable around me or the other F&F folks."

"That's because you all make life fun again."

I take in the stage and the bar more than the other night. "I can see that, but I've never been to the Fae lands. So far Hex is the best place I've been. Everyone's always so nice. I'm just too scared to go out and do things on my own."

Sparkle hugs me again. "That's way you hadn't come to F&F before. I was the only person you'd know, and I'd be working."

"Exactly."

"I'm glad Poe is helping you with your courage." Sparkle squeezes me before letting me go. "And now it's time you learn how to blow his mind sucking his dick."

Wren's lips twitch before he snorts. "The key to good sex is communication. Remember that, it's important."

"Actually, I have a question before we start." My body heats like lava dumped over my head and trickles down. "I don't actually know what a courtesan is and what it has to do with sex."

"Oh." Wren's mouth opens and closes and he fiddles with the hem of his pant leg. "I'm basically a high-class prostitute. I don't just sleep with people, though. In the Winter Court, courtesans of the royal court are sacred and highly skilled in languages, politics, music, dance. I'm educated so I can entertain my betters in all ways. I learned the art of sex and pleasure once my wings glowed."

“I’ve never been to school. Edward taught me how to read and write, but that’s the extent of schooling I’ve had. Everything I know is from observation or television or reading.” Or asking a billion questions and annoying people.

Sparkle rubs my back. “Do you wish you had schooling? The academy has adult education classes.”

I shrug. “Never thought about it. Never thought I’d make friends and live in a town. Make money. Live in an apartment. I always thought I’d live among humans as a bat or struggle as a human. I didn’t need to know more. And now... dunno? I get by and I don’t feel inferior most of the time.”

“Ugh,” Sparkles says. “That’s because you’re smart as fuck. The grocery store was genius.”

I laugh and knock him back with my shoulder. “No, I just observed people and made a plan that Randy let me execute. But enough about that. Let’s learn how to suck dick.” I giggle, thinking about it. “Specifically big dicks because Poe is enormous.”

Sparkle sucks in a breath. “You’ve seen it?! You’ve been holding out on me.”

“One moment,” Wren says before disappearing. He’s back before Sparkle and I can say anything and pass us both bananas.

This is really happening. My brain fizzles out. What am I doing? Am I ready?

“Beau?” Sparkle pats my shoulder. “You’re squeezing that banana awfully hard. Are you okay?”

“Freaking out a little here.” My heart races and my palms sweat. I start my four count breathing and hold up a finger. “I’ll be okay, give me a minute.” Or five. What the

hell am I thinking? The idea of more than making out is too much right now. Why am I even here? Why did I think this was a good idea. Besides, what if after our dates we're not actually compatible? Poe is smart to slow things down.

Someone takes the banana from me.

Wren squats in front of me and takes my face in his hands, making me look at him. "It's okay if you're not ready. No one is going to make you do anything . Would you like to just watch and not participate?"

I nod, and Wren releases my face.

"Sorry," I say.

"No," Wren and Sparkle say together.

Wren smoothes a tendril of hair from my face. "If you're not comfortable, we can end this now."

"I don't know. I want to learn, but I'm scared of disappointing anyone."

"Trust me," Wren says. "I don't think that's going to happen. Not today, not with Poe." He settles against the pole again. "Relax and soak in the information. Let me know if you want me to take you home though, promise me."

"Promise." I nod and cross my legs.

For forty-five minutes, Wren educates us on not only blow jobs, but hand jobs, and consent.

"If you're not feeling it after you start, you can totally stop what you're doing. If they

say you can't, they're wrong and squeeze their dick until they scream." Wren squeezes his banana, and it oozes from the peel, making us all squirm. "That said, I've never had to deal with anything like that in court because everyone knows to respect the courtesans or they'll pay dearly."

My eyes start to droop and by the end of the class, while enjoying the education, I'm ready for bed.

"Let's get Beau some sleep powder and off to bed," Sparkle says as he peels his banana and munches on it.

"Sounds good to me. I need to grab a few supplies from Renaud's anyway." Wren pushes to his feet and grabs both of our hands.

We don't take too long at the little shop. It's only big enough for the three of us, plus Renaud, the witch that runs the place. He gives me an eye pillow that smells like roses and tells me to heat it in the microwave for a few seconds to help me relax.

Wren drops me off at home and I immediately strip and shower real quick before microwaving the eye pillow. The sleep powder is pink and fine, like some of Sparkle's makeup. I dab the powder puff to my eyes before placing the warm pillow across my lids. I'm out before I even take another breath.

POE

It took me some time to think of what I'd like to do on my date with Beau. My first date in centuries. I told Beau to dress comfortably and I'm going through every outfit in my closet like I'm a teenager in an 80s movie montage. Nothing feels right.

I finally settle on a pair of jeans that hug my ass in the right ways, black leather boots, and a dark violet henley with the sleeves rolled up. Sure, I might look like I'll sweat buckets, but I'm a demon, I'm comfortable.

I shoot a text to Beau that I'll be there in about five minutes, giving myself time to let the nerves work their way from my system. I hope he enjoys what I have planned.

When I pop into Beau's living room, he's sitting at this table, knee bouncing. His hair is wet, accentuating his curls. He's dressed in a nice pair of black slacks, his gym shoes, and a baby blue button-down shirt where he rolled up the sleeves. His headphones are in place and sunglasses clutched in his hands.

Beau bounces to his feet and launches himself at me. I catch him and breathe in his scent. He doesn't smell like me, but apricots and honey, which must be his shampoo or soap. I'll have to snoop to find what he uses.

"It's silly to miss you when we don't even know each other all that well." Beau rubs his head on my chest and I keep hold of him. I want to always be comfortable for him, someone safe. Someone to want.

"I missed you too. The council meetings have only been bearable because I knew

we'd see each other today." I kiss the top of his head before letting him go.

"I'm sorry about the meetings." He blinks up at me. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

I shake my head. "We have everything we need underway. The covens have agreed to make a new barrier, but they need a few things, then they'll start a brew that goes around the entire town. It takes time to make."

"But everything's okay?" He clings to me.

"Perfectly fine." As far as I know, anyway. "None of my Hellhounds or the griffins have alerted me otherwise."

"But what about that weird feeling I got at the Welcome sign?"

"The griffin investigating the area said he didn't find anything, but I have another doing a follow up investigation just in case." I won't put Beau or anyone else in danger ever again, not if I can help it.

"Okay." Beau squeezes my hand.

"Ready for our date?" My heart soars. Our first date.

"Yes." His cheeks turn that pretty pink and I lift his chin to look at me.

"I hope you like dancing, sweet."

His eyes go wide and I don't give him time to answer before we're in front of the cultural building. Every shifter type, demon, born witch, etc. is allowed to use this building to share their culture in any way they see fit and many shifter types use it for

dance lessons to share their joy with others. It's one of my favorite places in Hex.

I release Beau, and he takes in the unassuming brick building. It's two stories with many huge rooms, so several activities can happen at once. Most of the time people schedule so others can attend all activities.

"Ash, one of our dragons, has weekly dance classes for couples. This is a beginner's class, so it shouldn't be too hard. I've always wanted to come, but not by myself."

Beau squeezes my hand, probably because he's held back from doing things for fear of being alone, too.

"Ash, that's such a good dragon name." Beau grins up at me and I grin back.

"He's a great guy. Single father. His mate left him a few years ago, leaving him to hatch their egg alone."

Beau's smile falters. Why the fuck did I tell him that?

"Ash is an excellent teacher, I hear." I squeeze Beau's hand and open the door. "He works nights as a trucker, bringing us supplies when we need them." We'd teleport everything, but that looks suspicious after a while, so we employ people to work between the humans and us when needed. Mostly people we can disguise as human, but Ash has a few assets that make him hard to disguise.

I lead Beau up the stairs and to the right to a room with half a dozen other people ready to learn whatever Ash has planned. Chairs line the perimeter of the room, but everyone chats away in the center. Ash isn't here yet.

Beau clings to my arm as we make introductions. I don't recognize everyone in the room, but I've never been overly social. That makes me uneasy, though. I should

know most if not everyone in Hex and make a mental note to get out more. To learn the people. I realize I want people to know me too. Me, not Poe, the king of the crossroads demons, but me .

Not much longer and Ash strolls in. His shirt pulls across his big chest. And those jeans strain against his huge thighs. Beau's eyes grow wide. Ash is huge, and he has horns that rival mine, scooping back before rising to the sky. His canine teeth are fangs and instead of nails, he has claws.

"Good evening, everyone," his deep voice rumbles through the room. "I hope you're having an awesome night. Please make use of the charcuterie board in the kitchen." He waves to the door in the far corner. "And there's wine, water, tea, and juice for anyone that wants it. I'm Ash and if you haven't met me, I'm a dragon shifter, which is different from a true dragon and if you're curious, I'm happy to create a class on the differences. But that's not why you're here today."

"Awe, where's Misty today?" someone asks.

Ash chuckles and presses his palms to his chest. "My sweet baby has a playdate because tonight's class is a mating dance."

Heat drains from my face and Beau looks at me with big eyes. I pull him close and whisper, "I swear I didn't know. We can leave if you want?"

He shakes his head. "I want to stay. It should still be fun, right?"

"Right." I just hope I don't want to take him back to my place and do naughty things if we're both not ready.

Ash paces the room as he explains the night. "The mating dance is sensual. You're trying to seduce your partner. That's why you're here, right?"

Everyone nods, even Beau, but I have to wonder if he's caught up in the atmosphere or if he actually wants to seduce me. I know I want to seduce him.

In any case, he's endearing as he watches every step Ash takes, even if the dragon is just talking right now. I'd be content watching Beau take in the information. I can practically see his brain working.

Too soon Ash shows us the moves, and Beau copies the actions as Ash does them. It takes everything in me not to either chuckle at how just utterly adorable and awkward Beau is in his movements, or moan when he's stunning, nailing the move.

We all work our hips, undulating even though it feels weird as fuck to me. But Beau is thoroughly enjoying himself, from what I can tell. His hands perch on his hips and he wiggles one way, then the other. He laughs every so often when he gets a move wrong and it's my favorite sound in all the world. In all the realms.

When it's time to work with a partner, I realize this is where I'll be in trouble.

Ash borrows someone's partner who has obviously been here before with how comfortable they are with the teacher. They demonstrate step-by-step how the couple dance works after learning the solo actions.

I'm totally fucked. Beau's face is flushed from practice. His lips so kissable, but I'll refrain.

"Do you want to lead?" I ask, not wanting him to think it needs to be me.

Beau shakes his head and I follow Ash's directions, wrapping my right arm around Beau's back. We're so fucking close. His breath ghosts my throat, making my dick take notice even more.

We press our right hips together, just like Ash says. Ash even comes around and presses our hips even closer. Beau sucks in a breath and looks up at me before he rubs his head along my chest. He does that a lot and I take it as approval.

Ash runs us through the rest of the steps. Pressing one hip, then the other over and over, swinging so our groins don't touch. There are a few bits of footwork, but Beau and I are both so concentrated on not touching dicks, we can't get our feet to work.

Beau swallows and the scent of arousal fills the surrounding air, his and everyone else. He's so pliant in my arms. I spin him out and pull him back for a dip, making him squeal.

"Yes! Improvise, make the dance your own," Ash says from the corner as he observes us all. This breaks the tension between Beau and I. He bursts out in a laugh.

"I thought I had to follow the instructions." Beau grabs my shoulders and pulls himself upright before again rubbing his head against my chest. I drop my hands to his hips and he sways, keeping eye contact as if to search if he's doing okay.

Everything he does is like a balm to my soul. Beau chirps and Ash's head snaps towards us again.

"Yes! Use your voice. Take the steps and make them your own. This is your time." Ash shuts his eyes and dances with himself in the corner for a few beats.

I only have eyes for Beau. His eyes are so expressive and in different light changes color from deep brown to golden honey. Right now they're dark, with a darker ring around them, making them even more stunning than I remember.

"I missed you so fucking much." Again, I wrap my arm behind his back and pull him in. Our hips connect like magnets and we start from the beginning of the dance Ash

showed us. Beau's heart pounds and he chirps a whine before slapping a hand to his mouth. His eyes plead with mine and I can't help it.

I cup the back of his head and press my lips to his, needing to taste him, breathe him, feel him.

"Mmmmm, yes," Beau says against my lips. "More." He tugs at my shirt, and before we can make an entire scene, I transport us to Beau's bedroom, dropping to his futon, squishing pillows, blankets, and plushies beneath me.

Beau writhes on top of me as our lips connect. I can't get enough of him in my arms.

"I tried not to get horny, but it didn't work," Beau says. "You were too sexy and so close."

"And you were perfect." Just perfect.

Beau leans down and presses his forehead to mine. His hips still and he breathes me in.

"What do you want, Beau?" I whisper, rubbing a finger over his cheek, memorizing every inch of his beautiful face. I know the question drops a bucket of ice over us all, but I need the answer and we can't go further, not with both of our hearts on the line.

"I don't want to be left behind." Another head rub and he sinks into my chest, clinging to me. His finger circles over my clothed skin as he talks. "If I don't have friends, no one can leave me behind. That's why I stayed in the human world for so long. Among humans, there wasn't really a place for me, so I couldn't really get close to anyone when Edward died. But I was so lonely." He slides down my body and wraps his arms around me, to burrow his head against me. "Now I have Hex and friends." He pushes up to look me in the face. "I didn't know how much having

friends changes things. I'm not alone anymore. But..." He flops back again, staring at the ceiling I just now notice has fairy lights stapled to it.

"Having friends means you can get left behind."

"Exactly. I know in Hex, most of us live long long lives, but we're not immune to death. What if—" He shakes his head so fiercely I grab his chin and kiss him to make him stop. "What if Sparkle dies? Or even Wren. Randy?"

"Sweetness, we can't live our lives like that. Sparkle, Wren, and Randy are all young. And demons live, well, some of us live until we're killed."

"And that's another worry." He nibbles that poor abused bottom lip of his. "What happens if your curse ends? Will the others come to kill you? I don't want to lose you, I'm too attached already."

"Sweetheart, is that what you're worried about?" I'm attached already, too. That's the problem with us demons. We decide on a person and they're ours. It happened with several of my crossroads demons, and I'm not surprised it's my fate as well.

He nods and I kiss his forehead, then his nose.

"I don't know what's going to happen if my curse ends."

"When. When it ends. I don't know how to create love in chaos and I'm sure manufactured chaos doesn't work, but..."

I kiss him again and again. "Don't worry about me." It's probably better if I'm never freed, so I don't have to face the wrath of everyone that's been affected.

"But I do." We lay in silence before Beau turns the question back on me. "What do

you want, Poe?”

“No one’s ever asked me that, and I’ve never thought about it once I got cursed.”

“Think about it. Please?” His endearing head rubs come with purring now.

I cup his cheek and kiss him more. “What if I moved to Hex?”

“You don’t want to live in the demon realm?”

“No. I realized that earlier. I’m tired of the politics in the demon realm. Hex is a much quieter life. That’s what I crave. The council is a little chaotic, but Hex herself is wonderful.” And I could get a place big enough for the both of us and we’d never have to be apart. Technically, I could take him to the demon realm and live there, but I’d never dream of taking him away from his friends. Plus, there are way more interesting people around here to satisfy my chaos cupid nature. Demons get boring so fast. But I could match a certain dragon with someone that would cherish him and his daughter for all their days. And a certain Fae would go so well with a certain griffin baker. The possibilities are endless.

I smooth a hand over Beau’s flat stomach. “The date isn’t over unless you want it to be, but I planned on feeding you, too.”

“I love food.” He grins just as both our stomachs rumble.

I tug him to his feet and away we go on our next adventure of the night.

BEAU

The bustle of Wick's Bakery buzzes around us. Sparkle laughs as I tell him about the date and how neither Poe nor I had any idea the class was going to be a mating dance.

"I love Ash. He's always so gentlemanly when he comes to F&F. I wish I could find Reyna and throat punch her on his behalf, but she left Hex once she laid that egg. Poor Ash mourned her loss, but he shows his girl love enough for like ten parents."

"I hope we can go back, but I hope it's not a mating dance next time."

Wren pats my shoulder, but snort laughs. "Mating dances are the most fun. Especially dragon ones, though I'm partial to Fae dances."

"I had fun, but it's awkward trying to dance with a boner." But Poe smelled so good and his hands on me felt so wonderful.

"Did you do the deed?" Wren wiggles his brows.

I shake my head. "We promised each other five dates before we try anything again, but we ended up at my apartment and made out a little on my bed." And poured out a few bits of our hearts.

"See, just too cute," Sparkle sighs. "When are you seeing each other again?"

I shrug. "He showed up at the grocery store and gave me a single rose about two hours into my shift. Then he showed up again halfway through and sat with me while

I ate during my break.”

“Oh, he has it so, so bad.” Sparkle takes a sip of his fancy coffee drink. I tried it, but didn’t like the bitter aftertaste beneath all the sugar.

“Then he walked me home at the end of my shift. I didn’t want to teleport because it was such a pretty morning and we ended up making out, then he made me breakfast.”

“That demon is whipped,” Wren says, making a motion with his hand and a crack sound.

“He did growl at a few people and I had to tell him to cut it out. He was so cute when he went red and apologized to them.”

Sparkle sighs as he takes another drink. “I wish I had someone.”

“Ugh.” Wren crushes a napkin in his hand. “Same though. Someone tall, and golden-haired, that can fly with me.”

I nod toward the counter. “Like Talon?”

“Like Talon,” Wren whispers and looks to the griffin shifter watching our table. When Talon notices us watching him, the man drops his eyes and goes back to wiping down the counter.

“You two would be such a sexy couple,” Sparkle says. “You should ask him out sometime.”

Wren snorts. “I’m bold, but until I’m free of my contract, I can’t date anyone. So until that piece of paper is dissolved, I’m solo.” His shoulders drop and he turns to ripping the napkin apart.

I have to wonder if I could ask Poe to work his chaos cupid magic to get my friends partners that adore them.

We part ways after some hugs and the rest of the day I putter around my apartment, doing chores I've neglected for a few days. When I'm done, I feel bold and snap a picture of myself half naked and send it to Poe before hopping into the shower. We're not seeing each other again for a few days because he has some important Hex meetings he can't get out of, but I can tease him just a tiny bit.

When I check my phone after my shower, I have a voicemail.

"You naughty little sweetie," Poe's voice rumbles low and makes my dick hard. "You have me so hard in the middle of a meeting."

I snap another pic with water still running down my chest and send it. Then I turn around and stick my booty out, taking a pic in the mirror. I reserve that one for his next message. But instead of texting or calling, Poe shows up right there in the bathroom. His hands drop to my hips.

Poe's eyes glow in the steamy room and he bends over to whisper in my ear, "You're such a pretty little tease." He purrs when he licks up my jaw, being extra careful with his horns.

I raise a hand to pull him down for a kiss, but he blinks out, leaving me panting instead.

Fuck, maybe I shouldn't play with fire. But I can't help sending that booty pic.

POE

Beau and I have a pattern. Some days, we work on his storm exposure therapy. He's getting better and the other day he started talking to a therapist.

Other days we go on a date, then we tease each other with pictures and texts until I can't stand it anymore and I pop in for a kiss and grind session until we both can't breathe. I've lost count of the dates we've had, from more dancing to pottery to painting. We took a charcuterie class and then fed each other little nibbles all night long. We haven't gotten naked again though, not that I mind. I'll make out with him forever, if that's all he wants. It's more than enough for me with him in my arms.

Every time I'm in the council room, I think about the latest kiss, the latest look of ecstasy on his beautiful face. Right now, I'm sure everyone in the room can tell my mind is somewhere else.

Beau and I tell each other our darkest secrets and our biggest hopes. He loves his job, and I'd never take him away from it. He's helped Wick rearrange the bakery, so the shop isn't so backed up in the streets every morning and to maximize the seating. He's helped Renaud make his store bigger with a few slight changes. Beau loves helping people fix their spaces to work better for them. And I love helping Beau relax. Whether it's just cuddling or grooming or watching him perform for me in his bat form. My heart belongs to this little shifter.

I still haven't told him I contacted the colony in West Virginia. I don't want him disappointed if they never respond, but I'm starting to get anxious about it. Surely someone monitors the email address. I've called the number several more times and

get the same results as before. I don't want Beau to leave, but I do want him to know there are other options for him if he feels the need to leave.

"Poe?" Leo says with irritation in his voice.

"Hmm?"

"Were you paying any attention at all just now?" the vampire pinches the bridge of his nose like I do and I suppress a laugh.

"Sorry, my mind is off in la la land. Would you kindly repeat the question?"

"Did you read the report on the unidentified shadows?"

"What?!" My heart pounds and I pull my phone from my pocket to read over the report. Uncontained shadows were found in the community garden earlier and they cleared it out for investigation. "Why wasn't I informed earlier?"

"You were, just like the rest of us, but you've been distracted." Leo pounds his fist on the table. "We need you to have your head on straight, Poe. This is serious now. The covens won't have the new wards ready for another few days, and we need to up the security to keep the shadows back."

"Yes. I'll do better. Who found the shadows?"

Trixie taps a pattern on the table as she thinks. "The wood nymph, Nef. They were cleaning the stage when they saw the shadows just lurking in the stands. Poor thing solidified into a tree right there before they could call us."

"Fuck," I whisper.

“Fuck in deed,” Leo says. “So we all need to be on high alert. We sent out the Hex newsletter. We need everyone to pay attention to their surroundings. The entire town is closed until we can find out where the shadows fled to.”

My phone buzzes.

Beau: It’s my fault, isn’t it? Everyone is in danger because of me.

“I need to take this.” I lift my phone and press Beau’s number.

It rings a few times before Beau picks up.

“I... I need to go. They’ll follow me, right?” There’s shuffling around in the background. I love how he’s gotten braver since we met, but this isn’t how I want things to go.

I growl. What the fuck is happening? “Stay where you are. I’m coming to get you.”

“Poe,” Leo says. “You need to think about this community.”

“I am thinking about this community. Beau is a part of Hex, and he’s trying to run.” I don’t know why I’m arguing with people I need to be with Beau.

“They’re here for me,” Beau’s voice shakes.

“They could be here for any reason,” I say. Why am I arguing with him on the phone?

There’s a boom and a squeak. I’m out of that council room in a heartbeat, but when I appear at Beau’s apartment, he’s not here. His door is broken wide open. Darkness drenches the place as if it stole all the lights from the entire block.

“Beau!” I yell his name and run from his apartment. Everywhere shadows lurk. Hellhounds growl, their eyes glow, but I know it’s useless. Beau’s gone, and it’s my fault.

“Whoever took him, I will find you and rip you apart. Mark my words, you’ll pay!” I turn to the closest Hellhound. “Seal the wards, make sure no one comes in or out. I don’t give a fuck if they are a resident of Hex. No one is leaving until I have Beau again.”

The Hellhound howls a call to the others. I don’t wait to see if they do the job, knowing as soon as the barrier glows a strange blue, the deed is done.

I’m back in the council room, ready to start a war with necromancers and shadow users. No one takes someone I love and gets away with it. I didn’t know how deeply my heart would ache at the thought of Beau being taken from me.

“Breathe, Poe,” Trixie says. She lays a soft hand on my arm and I wave her off.

“They took?—”

Van pops into the council room, his blue tail wiggling in anger. “They took Gabe! I’m going to rip them apart.”

“We have to think about this rationally,” Leo says. But the rest of the council isn’t having it.

“They took our people. We need to retaliate,” Trixie says.

“I sealed the barrier. They should all still be inside,” I say.

“Good job. Now the rest of the residents are in danger too,” Leo says.

“At least this means we contain the risk from the humans and we’re not all exposed,” I growl, baring my teeth.

“Where the fuck did they take Gabe?” Van’s horns and tail catch fire. He balls his fists. “I’ll burn down the entire town to find him.”

I glare at Leo. “So will I.” Beau is the most precious thing in my life. “Perhaps the pair are together. If that’s the case, they should be okay.”

Van laughs. “Those shadows really have something coming if they think they can contain Gabe for long. He’s been practicing all his nephilim tricks. Maybe he’ll free them both.” He plops a seat on the table. “Maybe we should wait and see what he can do.” He grins and I want to smack it from his face.

“You do realize he could be totally incapacitated, right? Shadow users and necromancers can control nephilims. They’ll pluck him like a chicken while he’s unconscious. We have to find them both before they get access to any of those feathers or they start to drain Beau’s blood.”

The color leaves Van’s face. “Then what the fuck are we waiting on? We need to find them. Now!” He takes my hand and we’re in the town square. The sky’s darker than it should be at this time of day. My heart pounds painfully in my chest.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Van chants, his flames getting brighter.

My violet flames burst from my horns and stunted tail. “Bring me your prisoners and you won’t get hurt,” I bluff.

“Fuck that, I’m killing whoever the fuck hurt my angel.” Van’s hands catch fire. “How do we track these fuckers?”

“Probably the cemetery.” I rub my temple, trying to think of everything I know about necromancers who use the dead for divination and sometimes raise the dead to use as slaves. Shadow users often partner with necromancers since they can hide the work of necromancers. It’s some fucked up relationship if you ask me. They know they aren’t welcome in any of the sanctuary towns because they don’t play well with others. Their magic works with blood and that’s a no go for us.

“I wish I’d bound myself to Gabe like Wick did to Ethan, then I could use a tracer spell on him. As soon as I get him back, that’s what I’m doing.”

“Hush,” I say, slicing my hand through the air. “Listen.”

There’s a groaning melody coming from somewhere I can’t pinpoint. Like a pipe organ, but softer.

“What is that?” Van says.

“No idea,” I whisper, heading towards the sound.

“Fuck. Wait!” Van shouts, just as I get in range of a spell I hadn’t seen.

Sizzling electric rings wrap around my legs and torso, pressing my arms to my chest, making it hard to breathe. Rising in the air, I struggle. Whatever magic they’re using, I can’t teleport.

Van holds his hands primed to shoot fireballs, but there’s no one around.

“Get out of here, Van.”

“No! I’m not leaving you.”

I kick out, trying to get the magic to shimmy off, but it doesn't budge. "Go! Listen to your king."

Van snorts. "You know, that never really worked on me."

"You're never going to be king, Van. You'll hate me when you find out why. Save yourself."

He snorts again. "Oh, I know all about what the fuck happened. The prince has been coming around and apologizing to us all."

I stop struggling. "What?"

"Yeah, came by a couple of weeks back. Said he feels bad and says he wished he'd never cursed you. Said you suffered enough."

Well, damn. "Never saw that coming. I thought he'd hate me for eternity." I try to twist out of my confines again. I have to get free for Beau.

There's a familiar screech and I swear my heart stops for a few moments. "Beau!" I throw my arms out with as much force as possible, and the magic around me snaps. I race towards the sound. Towards Beau.

"Damn it, stop struggling!" A dark, craggy voice barks out, and I want to rip out their voice box. "We need your damn blood, you little flying rat!"

My blood boils. "He's not a flying rat!"

Van and I charge, but we're blasted back. The last thing I hear is Beau screech again.

BEAU

Gabe and I are alone for who knows how long. I know Poe and Van came for us, but the shadows did something to them. Terror rips through me, but the more I can use echolocation to get a feeling of where I am, the better odds Gabe and I have of getting out of this without him losing feathers and me being drained dry.

“Hang in there, Beau.” Gabe assures me, but I can scent his blood in the air. I don’t know where he’s hurt, but he’s not in any condition to soothe me.

I screech again and again, learning every inch of this room before I say anything.

“How badly are you hurt?” I whisper.

“I’m fine.” But Gabe’s voice is too gravelly with pain.

“You’re bleeding and not healing.” I screech again, trying to see more in the dark.

There’s a whisper of movement from Gabe. “They got some kind of collar on me. I think it’s blocking my magic. I can’t call in my wings or grow or heal. Anything.”

I finger the cold metal around my throat. “I have a collar too, but I can still echo locate. Can you run?”

“I think so.” Gabe swallows and groans when he takes a step, but he doesn’t change his answer.

“When I tell you to run, don’t let go of my hand.”

“Okay. If we get out of this, I owe you the softest blanket ever.”

I snort. “Appreciated, but you don’t owe me anything.”

Thunder rumbles around us, and I squeak. My knees tremble, but I push the fear away. It’s fake, just like Poe’s storms. I can deal with this.

“There’s a door just to our left. I don’t know if it’s locked or not, but I want to try it.”

We take tiny steps inch by inch to accommodate Gabe’s injury. He’s breathing heavy.

“Just a little further,” I say, throwing his arm over my shoulder. “We can do this.” I screech and reach out, my fingertips grazing the doorknob. I fumble with it, trying to open the damn thing, but it doesn’t move. “Fuck.” Not that I thought it’d open.

“Beau? I—” Gabe slips from my grasp and drops to the floor.

“No!”

Gabe still breathes, but he must have lost more blood than I thought. I pat him down until I find the injury on his leg. I don’t know much about injuries, but I think legs are one of the worse places for them. I press my hands to hopefully help stop the bleeding. “Don’t die. Please don’t die. I need to come to your knitting club. Learn how to knit. Meet new people. I need you to stay alive. People like you. I like you. Please.” Tears well in my eyes. I can’t lose Gabe. We don’t know each other well, but I can’t lose someone else. Not like this, not because of me. Not again.

Lights flip on, blinding me. I squeeze my eyes closed.

“Fuck!” someone shouts. “The nephilim can’t bleed out. He’s the one we need the most.”

I cling to Gabe, but someone kicks me off him and drags him away. “Wait! Please! Don’t hurt him,” I beg as they shut the door behind them. I don’t want to open my eyes, it’s too bright. There’s shuffling around the room.

“If you cooperate, we’ll let you live and we’ll just drain you a little bit.”

“Gee thanks. Sounds great,” I deadpan.

“Don’t get cheeky with me, you pathetic animal. Scared of storms. You’re a shifter. What reason do you have to be afraid of anything? Well, anything except for me.” Something sharp drags across my cheek and I pull away.

“Leave me alone. You don’t know who you’re up against.”

“Those punny crossroads demons? Pft.” The sharp edge digs into my skin and a tongue licks my cheek. “You taste so good. So much power in that tiny little bat body.”

Bile rises in my throat. “Let me go.”

“Nope. You’re mine now, little one.”

“Don’t you dare call me that.” I spit and hope it hits my mark.

“Why you little?—”

A boom blows the door open. I screech more to get my bearings than out of fear. The person scratching into my face scares me more than the explosion.

“That’s right. Cry for me. It makes the blood so much sweeter.” Another lick of my cheek before he turns to face the intruders.

“You better let him go or you’ll find yourself in tiny little pieces like the other guy,” Poe’s voice is the sweetest.

I peek one eye open to see him standing in flames with his hands up, aimed for me and my captor.

“Now, what’s it gonna be?” Poe laughs manically, throwing his head back. “Because I give zero fucks if you live or not. Beg me for mercy and I might let you live. But you’ve hurt my little sweetie and for that, you pay.” He growls and prowls towards us.

There’s a wild look in his eyes, something I’ve never seen before and I have to wonder if it’s his chaos cupid being fed by the chaos of the situation.

I try to pull myself from my captor’s arms, but he tugs me in front of him. “You wouldn’t hurt your little sweet, would you?” He presses his knife to my side. “Come any closer and I’ll open him up and drink in his blood. You don’t wanna see how powerful I am, filled with the essence of bat.” He sniffs along my throat and I thrash.

“Let me go!” I kick back, hoping a kick to the gonads would make him release me, but all that does is make him grunt. He pokes me in the ribs with the knife.

“Don’t do that again or you’ll regret it.”

I roll my eyes because that’s such a henchman thing to say if movies are any indicator. “What do you plan to do?” I say, stalling, hoping Poe can get into a position to take this guy out.

I twist and turn, wishing the stupid collar wasn't around my neck.

"Ah," Poe says. "Be right back." He poofs out.

"What the fuck?" My captor relaxes enough where I can move.

I spin on him, punching him in the face before I run. My heart pounds as fast as my feet carry me to my destination.

I get to the blown open door before he kicks a foot out from under me and I trip. I grab the door frame, doing my best to keep from getting dragged back in. I just know if I'm dragged back in, I won't get out.

Poe stands in front of me with a flaming sword. "Perfect." He leans in and kisses my bloody cheek.

My captor screams behind me when Poe charges for him. The sword sucks in shadows until the room is as bright as the sun. I look away when Poe slices my captor in half. I don't need to see it to know it happened. The sound is enough evidence for me.

My knees buckle before I make it very far, but before I can drop to the ground, I'm in Poe's arms.

"Fuck. Baby." He presses his bloodied forehead to mine. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

I nod. "Is—Is Gabe?"

"He's perfectly healed now. Van got the collar off and I'm sure they're fucking in their apartment right now. We captured the ones that did this and Leo is interrogating

them now.” Poe kisses my forehead. “Fuck, I thought I lost you.” Tears rim his eyes, his hands shake. “I’m not good enough to keep you safe. You need a colony.”

I cup his face. “I want to be here, with you. I’d love to visit a colony, but no one and nothing is taking me away from you.” I press my lips to his, ignoring the tangy taste of blood. “I love you, Poe. You came for me. And you’ve helped me so much. I can’t see life without you.”

“I don’t want life without you in it,” Poe squeezes me close.

“Take me home, Poe. Take me home and make me yours,” I whisper.

We’re in his big shower in an instant with steaming, hot water blasting all around us. Pink water swirls down the drain as mine and Poe’s lips press together as we strip our bloodied close from our bodies.

“I should have kept a better eye on you,” Poe says.

“Don’t blame yourself. Please , don’t.”

His hands are in my hair, scrubbing and massaging, relaxing me. We’ve gone on more than five dates, neither of us paying attention, just enjoying each other’s company, two lonely souls finally finding peace.

“I need to make sure you’re in one piece.” His fingers dab at my cut cheek. “He cut you. I wasn’t fast enough.”

“I’m okay.” I pull his hand from my face and kiss his finger. “ We’re okay.” Maybe a little traumatized. I’ve never been kidnapped before and hope never to have a repeat. That does something to a person. I don’t think storms will ever hold the same fear as they had. “Touch me. Claim me.” I nuzzle in his chest.

We're still wet when he teleports us to his bedroom. Creamsicle murrppphhs and scurries from the room, no doubt knowing she doesn't want to witness what we're about to do.

Poe lays me so gently on the bed, his eyes tracking mine every second. He drops to his knees, spreading my legs to kneel between them. The hungry look he gives me fills my cock. I reach for one of his horns and he presses a kiss to my palm.

My back arches when he kneads my thighs. He's so close to my dick, yet so far away. I want to tell him to do naughty things to me, but we both need the exploration. I need him to take his time and I know it, but my dick is impatient, spurting a bead of pre-cum. I fist myself and swipe the bead with my finger, offering it to my demon.

Poe's eyes glow, and he sucks my finger, savoring the offering. Fuck, what is his mouth going to feel like on my cock?

"I haven't touched anyone in so long before you. I want to explore every inch of your naked skin." He kisses my thigh. My stomach, chest. I pull him down to kiss his lips again.

"I love the taste of me on your tongue," I say, bolder than I usually am.

"I want to taste more of you," he says against my lips.

"You have me. Take your fill."

Poe moans and kisses back down my body. His big hands cup my ass as he scoots me to the edge of the bed. His eyes flick to me before he flattens his tongue and licks a strip from balls to crown, making me writhe. I fist the sheets.

"Poe," I breathe out.

He slowly takes my length in his mouth, eyes fluttering shut the closer he gets to my skin. It's as if I'm the most delectable treat he's ever tasted. One hand leaves my ass to massage my sac. He circles my hole with his free hand. I spread my legs wider, wanting him closer. His tongue swirls around my cock.

"So close. You're going to make me come." I grab his horns and hold on for dear life, letting every sensation burn through me. "Poe, fuck. I'm gonna?—"

He stops and flips me on my stomach, making me yelp. My hard cock presses against the mattress and he spreads my ass cheeks. I clutch at the sheet and melt as soon as his tongue licks at my hole.

"Do you want this?" His thumb swipes across my hole and I nod.

I'm not afraid anymore, not of intimacy, not of sex, not of storms. Right now, I want to feel him inside me.

Poe kisses one ass cheek, then the other before pulling my back to his chest. "If you want to fuck me, I'm good with that, too. I'm verse and don't exactly care what position I'm in."

I shake my head, twisting in his arms to face him. "Not today. I need you to fuck me."

He brushes his thumb over my bottom lip. "I'd rather make love to you."

My body burns at the admission. "Yes, that. Make love to me." I rub my head to his chest until he lifts my chin to kiss me.

My toes curl and I swear my brain short circuits. I'm lost to the feel of his tongue against mine. His lips against mine. We crawl into the bed together. It's like we've

choreographed a dance all our own. He reaches for the lube in his nightstand as he strokes my cock.

“We have to start slow,” he says.

I nod, knowing how big he is.

“My tail, is a good starter to open you up.”

I moan at the snap of the lube bottle and he fingers my hole until he decides I’m ready. My body sizzles with his every touch. I need more.

“Please,” I say, reaching for him again.

Poe straddles me, dropping to his elbows and presses his lips to mine as his tail eases into my hole.

My eyes squeeze tight. I spread my legs wider for him, taking every inch he gives me. “So good.” He hits a spot inside that lights up stars behind my eyes. “Do that again.” He does and kisses my jaw, the way I like.

“Baby, you’re so pretty like this, laid out, ready to take my cock.” He nibbles my nibbles and I have no idea what to do with my hands. I hold him to me, wanting him as close as possible.

I buck up, dragging my cock against his, needing more. His tail picks up speed and I swear it slowly grows wider.

“Poe,” I whine his name and he chuckles.

“Are you ready, baby?”

I nod, words not coming.

“Okay.” His tail pulls from me and I’m empty. I want him back. Poe pushes my thighs up. I wrap my hands around them, just like in one of the videos Sparkle sent me.

I stifle a laugh because Poe would probably be upset about the videos.

“Ready?” Poe slides his hand along my cock and I buck.

“So ready.”

We both hold our breath as he presses into my hole.

“Sweetness, you gotta breathe for me.”

I nod and do as he says, relaxing as much as possible. “So big.”

“We don’t have?—”

“Don’t you dare stop!” I grip his forearms. “Make love to me, please. I need you Poe.” More than I can ever say.

He ghosts another kiss to my lips.

Slowly, his cock fills me, and he stops. “Doing okay?”

“So big. So good.” I buck and he pegs my prostate, making a stream of pre-cum leak from my cock.

“You’re so fucking sexy like this. So debauched. My pretty little, Beau.” He thrusts

his hips a few times, making us both moan. I meet every move with one of my own. My ass is going to ache later, but I don't care.

I grab a horn and tug him to the right as I hook my leg around his to hopefully flip him to his back. I may have watched a few too many videos lately and wanted to try the move. He must understand my desire because he holds me to him as he turns and I'm on top.

My hands go to his chest and I bounce on his cock like the videos. I like having the control like this. I jerk my cock while Poe's hands hold my hips, hold me to him so I don't fall off. I don't know what I'm doing, but it doesn't matter. Poe's guiding me and my body knows how to sing this song.

"You're so fucking tight. I'm not gonna last much longer, sweetness."

I'm not ready for what Sparkle says is a cream pie. We both moan when I pull off Poe, but he's both jerking our cocks together.

"Fuck!" My head goes back and I come, shooting across his chest, lubing our cocks with my cum.

"Holy fuck!" Poe shakes as he comes, spurt after spurt shooting from his cock.

I lean down to lick our mixed spend before dropping to his side.

"Fuck," Poe says as he pulls me in for another kiss. "Just fuck. I never want to let you go." When he squeezes his eyes shut, tears leak out. "I'm sorry you got hurt."

I kiss his chest, hoping to soothe my demon. "I'm okay." And everything is going to be okay.

POE

Beau took a few days off work at my request. I didn't want him out of my sight until I calmed down. We swept the entirety of Hex and rid ourselves of the lingering shadow users. They're scarier than necromancers if you ask me because they can use shadows to infiltrate anywhere. They're like an octopus, they can enter a place much smaller than their bodies are. Luckily, the covens got the new wards in place without incident. Hex voted to have registration be voluntary, which is just fine with me. As long as everyone gets the resources they need, I'm happy. We set up a hotline and a text line for people to request supplies.

Beau sits in my lap as we watch a tv show I've already forgotten the name of, but it makes him laugh and that's all that matters to me. I kiss his nape and he melts.

My phone buzzes. I want to ignore it, and the outside world a little longer, but I still hold out hope the colony calls me back.

"One minute." I kiss Beau again and answer the phone.

"Is this Poe, king of the crossroads demons?" they have an accent that makes my heart flutter.

"I am."

"I'm Madeline with the West Virginia Bat Colony and we think you have one of our bats."

Immediately, Beau turns to face me. He must have heard her.

“I have a bat. I know he’s from West Virginia and?—”

“Is... Is his name Baby? Baby Beau?”

“Yes.”

There’s a sob on the other end. “He’s alive?”

“He is. He’s right here if you want to talk. Or give me the coordinates and we can be there in two seconds.”

She rattles off her location.

“Wanna go meet some more bats?” I ask. I should have asked before offering, but he’s nodding so I don’t feel so bad.

“Yes, please.”

“Hold on.”

We appear right outside of a forest. Beau tenses, but takes a few breaths to relax.

“Sorry,” Madeline says as she comes from the tree line. “We couldn’t let you inside the colony. We’re strict about outsiders. It’s for our safety. I’m sure you understand.”

“All too well,” I say.

Beau drops to his feet and takes a few steps. “You look familiar.” He squints. Three more people come from the tree line. All have features that Beau shares and I have to

wonder.

“Hi, Baby,” Madeline says. “I’m your maternal grandma.”

“Grammy?” he whispers.

“Yes, Baby.” She nods to the guy next to her. “And gramps.”

Another woman gazes on. “And we’re your dad’s parents.”

“Pop Pop? Mimi?”

“Yes,” Mimi wipes her eyes.

The four descend on him and he cries in their arms. I don’t want to break up the reunion and keep my distance. My eyes well with tears of my own. He has a family still.

“We thought—” Madeline says.

Beau shakes his head. “I know. I should have stayed in the woods, but I was so scared. When Edward came, I went with him. I’m sorry. I’m?—”

“No, Baby. No.” Mimi runs her fingers through his hair. “You did what you had to survive. You’re alive.” She blinks. “You’re here with us again.”

Beau steps back. “I—I don’t want to stay,” he whispers, and all four grandparents give him a knowing smile and a pat on the shoulder.

“The demon?” Madeline stage whispers.

Beau nods. "I love him. He helped me and I want to be with him."

I stroll over to the group. "I'm Poe and I'm happy to bring Beau over at any time, but he's mine. I've claimed him and will fight even you if you try to keep him from me."

Beau giggles when I nuzzle his neck. I'm still disappointed we haven't broken the curse, but it doesn't keep either of us down. I'll be a crossroads demon forever as long as I get to keep my little shifter.

"We don't plan on stealing him from you," Pop Pop says. He pats me on the shoulder. "We'll get you both on the list of approved people. Maybe we can have a monthly dinner?" He looks so hopeful and so does Beau. There's no way I'm denying them.

"Of course. You know my number."

Beau pulls his phone out and they all exchange numbers. "Call or text me anytime."

"I have one question," I ask of the group. "Why did it take so long to call me?"

Madeline's face goes red. "I forget to check the email. We rarely get any inquiries. I dropped the ball. Never again, though. I'm checking it daily from now on."

"So you run the colony?" I ask.

"Oh, no, none of us run it. I'm in charge of the colony email address because I was the one that wanted to usher in new technology. See what that gets me?" She laughs nervously. "But I'm never neglecting my duties again."

"I understand." I kiss the top of Beau's head. "More than you'll ever know."

“I’ll send you a text with the colony rules,” Madeline says. “They’re important for everyone’s safety, and we expect you both to follow them.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Beau says as he pulls her in for another hug.

One by one, they all hug my Beau, then they send us off with a promise of monthly dinners and meeting cousins, aunts, and uncles he doesn’t remember.

By the time we get back to my place, Beau is exhausted. Happy, but exhausted.

“Thank you,” he says, kissing down my jaw. “I don’t know how to repay you for finding my family.”

“You don’t need to repay me. I’m just glad you chose to stay with me.”

“I love you, Poe. I want to be with you forever. You’re my safe space. My warm blanket. My heart.” He presses his hand to my chest. “You showed me I’m not the coward I thought I was.”

This little shifter knows all the words to make my heart sing. “You’re everything I never thought I deserved. I love you more than I have words in all the languages I know.”

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:03 am*

BEAU

“ Beau!” one of my second cousins shouts right before they throw the ball.

I catch it in my bat form and dodge a tackle before dropping it through the goal. Poe snorts from the sidelines.

Batball is better than any of the silly human sports. We have to shift between forms to play. Anyone that can fly can play, but Poe got banned from playing when he growled at one of the guys when they tackled my bat two games ago. He apologized and took his banning with grace. I'll sweet talk someone into lifting the ban later if he wants, but right now I'm enjoying him rooting for my team.

A rumble of thunder rises my hackles, but doesn't terrify me like it had even a year ago. Poe shoots me a look and I give him a thumbs up. More thunder rumbles from the sky and a flash of lightning brightens the field as we clean up.

When rain pours from the sky, one of my little cousins scrunches down and holds his knees to his chest. A whine comes from him. Another clap of thunder and he shifts to his bat. I know exactly what it's like for the terror to rip through me and I race toward him, but Poe's on the field, coaxing my little cousin from the sky.

“Come on, William. It's safer down here when it's storming. I'll hold you if that'll help?”

My aunt watches on, no doubt wondering if my demon will indeed help or make things worse.

William's only about seven, but he flops in Poe's outstretched hand.

"Do you like being groomed?" Poe pulls out a toothbrush from his back pocket. We all love it and he's taken to carrying it around when he's at the colony.

William chirps and spread out on Poe's hand. Poe chuckles and drags the toothbrush across Will's back as he walks to the communal building we're all gathering in.

As much as I love my family, I miss Hex when we're not there. I miss my bestie, Sparkle, who taught me how to pole dance. Not well, but it entertains Poe and me when I practice. I miss Wren, who's not as jaded as he thinks he is. I miss Gabe, who taught me how to knit and the joys of gardening. I miss Wick's bakery and everyone inside. Hex is where my heart lies and Poe owns my heart.

Will flaps his wings at the next clap of thunder and Poe trips on his own feet. He flails back, throwing Will in the air. We all gasp when he almost smacks into a window.

"Sorry, kiddo!" Poe pushes to his knees and hisses. "Fuck." His head goes to the floor, and he pounds his fist.

"Poe!" I run to his side. "What's wro—" My eyes go wide. "Your horns! They're gone." I search his face. His eyes flash once before fading to a beautiful shade of brown.

"Fuck!" he cries out again. "Sorry for the R rated language kids."

His wings rip out of his back, leathery like our bat wings and they fill with soft white down. I want to reach out and touch, but Poe's in pain.

"Look at me, Poe. You broke the curse."

“What?” he croaks.

“You’re free.” I press my lips to his as his tail disappears. “You’re free .”

He cries out one last time. Something—a hidden collar—clatters to the floor, and he falls into my arms. No need to worry because the horns aren’t a problem anymore.

Murmurs fill the silence. One day we’ll have to explain, but not now. He’s free of all his obligations, and it’s time to celebrate. No more Poe the king. He resigned from the council months ago. No more anything. He’s free to be himself fully and completely.

My Poe. My home. My love is free.