



Knotty Bargain (Monster Holidays #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Never drink and summon a demon...

My cousin is getting married.

To my ex. Who cheated on me with her.

And the whole family insists I must go.

I can't show up single. I need a date, even if it's a fake one.

The spell was supposed to bring me love. Not a devil.

Not the literal King of the Underworld.

Now, I've accidentally bound ourselves, so there's no way out of this.

The Demon King will have to be my pretend boyfriend.

Just one problem: no one's ever made me feel the way he does.

The lines blur until they disappear.

He's a monster and we were supposed to be fake.

Then why does it feel so real?

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CHAPTER 1

CORDELIA

The Devil's Mountain is absolutely glorious. Blood reds, golden browns, and warm yellows make it a fall paradise. Burgundy maple leaves swirl around our car as we drive closer. The crisp autumn air whips through the open windows and tousles my hair as I stick out an arm to take another picture.

It's picture-perfect, beautiful, and quiet. It's...

"Bitch, I'm freezing my tits off; close that window or I'll kick you out of the car!"

I sigh as dramatically as possible as I close the window. "You're no fun! I'm just taking a picture!"

Sylvia curves her spine, pressing closer to the steering wheel. "Are pictures more important to you than the health of your best friend? It's like twenty-five degrees out there!"

"More like fifty," I say in a mock whisper to the window. Sylvia punches me in the shoulder.

It's been years since Sylvia and I visited our hometown, and I hadn't noticed how much I missed the sight of the mountain. There's something magical about growing up in a small town near a massive mountain with its own rich local folklore. Our entire lives, we wanted to move out. Sylvia and I would share the same twin bed and

daydream about touring the world with our favorite bands and our celebrity crushes falling for us at first sight in New York.

But there's a sweetness about going back home.

Sylvia rubs her arms. "Can you believe we're finally taking an entire month off? No work, no responsibilities. No construction at seven-thirty Sunday morning while I'm trying to return to my hot dream with Pedro Pascal."

"That was too specific." I laugh, glancing at my best friend.

Sylvia rushes her fingers through her dark brown hair, her dark eyes glinting when she looks at me. I always liked how Syl smiles with her eyes. "Are you going to tell me you don't have hot dreams? You've been in an extremely long dry spell. You must have some dreams."

I shake my head, rolling my eyes. "It's not a dry spell if I'm not looking for it. The world has more to offer."

Sylvia scoffs. "Alright. You say it as if I don't know you spend your nights with your smut books and a rabbit."

"Sylvia!" I try to sound offended, but it's impossible with her. We've been best friends for too long. We dreamed about leaving Shadow Glen and we left. Together. We live together. We support each other.

I don't know who I would be without her. No romantic love compares to lifelong friendships.

"And here we are!" Sylvia sing-songs as we approach, then fly past the town sign.

Welcome to Shadow Glen , it reads. Settled in 1623. Population: 6,624

I crane my neck to glance at it. “That sign is new, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, looks like it. The old one was probably from the foundation.”

I chuckle. We used to joke that it looked almost like a keep-out sign—old, rotting in the corners, the yellow paint peeling out. Shadow Glen had a handful of legends, but that sign only made it look like the place was haunted.

Sylvia sings along to Chappell Roan on the radio as we pass the first houses. Now that we’re here, reality is finally settling. My stomach feels funny.

It’s great to come back. I missed Sylvia’s mom. But... should we have come? I chew on my bottom lip. Was this a good idea?

Who accepts to come to their ex-boyfriend’s wedding anyway?

My mind moves to the wedding invitation crumpled in my purse. Being invited to your ex’s wedding isn’t that bad. I wasn’t in love with Marcus. We had been friends before. Besides, all of our high school friends would be there.

The problem is Marcus’s bride. Because not only did Marcus cheat on me, but he cheated on me with my cousin .

“Ugh, stop thinking about those two assholes,” Sylvia scoffs, her dark eyes flashing as if reading my mind.

I arch an eyebrow at her. “How do you know I was thinking about them?”

She tosses her long brown hair. “Perks of being your best friend.” She takes a beat.

“Marcus and Vivian deserve each other. Two lying, cheating snakes.” She shrugs. “I hated them and I was right. My intuition never goes wrong.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “You’re right.” I sigh, trying to shake off the melancholy. “The betrayal still stings a little, but this trip isn’t even about them. We just took advantage of the date. It’s about us having fun and letting loose for once.”

“Exactly! It could have been any other date. It’s a sad thing that your boss could only be convinced to give you the month off because your cousin was getting married.” She narrows her eyes as we pass an ad for a restaurant. “Karma will take care of your boss, Vivian, and Marcus.”

We pass a second ad. I don’t remember the town having these many ads and posters and such. What are they advertising anyway? We only have like two restaurants.

Sylvia waggles her eyebrows at me. “We haven’t been here in forever. Do you think there’s anyone we don’t know? Anyone you’d want to sleep with?”

Heat floods my cheeks and I glance away. “I doubt that very much. Besides, that’s none of your business.”

Sylvia blows raspberries. “As your best friend, it absolutely is. You need to get back out there! Screw Marcus.” She pauses, then snorts. “Well, don’t screw him. Screw someone better. You know what I mean.”

Marcus’s betrayal hurt, but less because of love—since I didn’t really love him—and more because of the broken trust. It feels like everyone I trust—Sylvia being the exception—betrays me somehow or abandons me in the worst possible ways.

After Marcus, I stopped searching. Just because I never fell in love doesn’t mean I can have sex with anyone. Sex is still about trust to me and there’s no way I’ll trust a

random guy I meet on some dating app.

“I’ll add it to the to-do list,” I say, curling my nose at her. “Along with the hundred other things you think I should try, apparently.”

“Hey, I’m just saying, this is a perfect time to face some fears and try new hobbies.” Her eyes gleam with mischief. “I still can’t believe you never learned to ride a bike. And your handwriting could definitely use some work. Maybe take a calligraphy class or something. Watch some videos online.”

“Gee, thanks,” I huff, crossing my arms over my chest. But a reluctant smile tugs at my lips. Sylvia always knows how to tease me out of a funk with her special brand of affectionate mockery.

We turn onto Oak Street, the main drag of downtown Shadow Glen. Here, we have to slow down—there’s a bit of traffic. Golden trees line the street. There are still the same Victorian street lamps, though they’ve been painted. The colorful awnings are cleaner than I remember. The flower baskets that only a handful of stores used to have now overflow with chrysanthemums from every window. It’s like driving into a Thomas Kinkade painting.

Sylvia parallel parks in front of Hex & Co. I remember spending hours here as a teen, giggling over spells and palm-reading manuals. It felt like our secret clubhouse in this sleepy, provincial town. Sylvia’s mom, the owner, would bring us tea and apples and cookies every couple of hours.

Nostalgia is a knot inside my chest. It makes me grin like a fool as I open the door.

But there’s something else.

“Doesn’t it seem different now?” I muse as we climb out of the car. Glancing over

my shoulder, I study the street. “Maybe... cleaner? There are more shops, too.”

Syl slams her door shut, then climbs onto the curb, her hands on her hips. She stares at Hex & Co.’s window display. When we were kids, this display held books and crystals and Miranda, Sylvia’s mom, used to only clean the windows once every month.

Now, the glass is so clear it’s almost invisible and Halloween decorations take up every inch of the space. Pumpkin candles, cute bat plushies, dainty porcelain rats, and the piles of books are aesthetically piled. And when I study the street, that seems to be a rule. Every shop is decked out in orange, purple, and black, with fairy lights, ghosts, and pumpkins.

Sylvia laughs. “Did we just walk into Halloween town?”

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CHAPTER 2

CORDELIA

Quaint shopfronts beckon with names like “The Cackling Cauldron” and “Broomstick Boutique,” their windows brimming with witchy decor. Massive pumpkins every twenty feet. Fairy lights wrapped around poles. The scent of cinnamon and cloves wafts from down the street.

And the street is crowded . People shopping, taking selfies, sipping from steaming paper cups.

“Are we in the right place?” I ask, doing a double take. Hex & Co. has always been called Hex & Co., but the other shops? The grocery store is still a grocery store but with a new display and name. The same happens with every other shop on this block.

“They’re really leaning into the spooky aesthetic, huh?” Sylvia raises an eyebrow as she meets my eyes. “Mom said they had been shaking things up, but she didn’t mention... all this.”

I chuckle. “The whole town got a mystical makeover.”

Sylvia grins as she hooks her arm through mine. “Come on, let’s see what Mom’s been up to.” She tugs me toward the door, freshly painted lilac.

The bell tinkles as we step inside, echoing through the maze of shelves and cabinets. The scent of jasmine greets us. Crystals glimmer from every surface, casting tiny

rainbows across the polished wood. A plume of fragrant smoke rises from an incense burner, curling around jars of herbs and mysterious tinctures. I get a glance at a plush chair behind a bookshelf—I used to spend hours sitting there when I was younger.

“Girls!” a melodic voice rings out and Miranda emerges from behind a beaded curtain, her silver hair swaying like moonlight. She throws her arms up and squeals. Sylvia mimics her, throwing her arms up and squealing at the same tone. I guess it runs in the family.

Miranda slams into us. She envelops us in a lavender-scented hug, her bangles jangling. Tears prick at my eyes as I melt into her embrace, my lips curling into a wide smile. After Mom passed when I was sixteen, Miranda and Sylvia became my home, my anchor in a world turned upside down. Even now, wrapped in Miranda’s arms, I feel that same sense of belonging, of family found.

Miranda lets us go, then kisses both of us in the face. “You two look so pretty!”

Sylvia definitely looks great—she’s skinny and tanned like her mother, with the same big brown eyes. Neither had a problem dating whomever they wanted.

Syl and I spent our lives glued at the hip, but we couldn’t look more different. I’m pale where she’s tanned. My eyes are blue. While her dark hair falls in a straight curtain down her back, my blond waves are indomitable. Her skin is flawless, while I struggle with concealer every day to hide my freckles. She’s a size two to my size sixteen.

Even though Syl never said a thing, every guy we met always treated me as the ugly friend.

Sylvia juts a thumb over her shoulder. “Mom. What is happening to this place? Are you giving away food or something?” Sylvia laughs at her own joke. “What’s with all

the new witchy shops?”

Miranda’s eyes sparkle. “Didn’t I tell you? Do you remember New Obernzell?”

“Of course I remember, Mom,” Sylvia says, shaking her head. “It’s literally two towns over.”

Miranda makes a show of shrugging. “You city girls, I don’t know how much you remember from home. You haven’t been here in ages.”

I smile, hooking my arm through Miranda’s. “What happened to New Obernzell?”

Miranda starts back toward the counter, taking Sylvia’s hand in hers. “Well, things happened in New Obernzell. It’s become quite a paranormal hub, with ghost hunters and whatnot. There’s even a podcast. So, folks around here have been embracing our... shall we say, occult heritage.” She lowers her voice, leaning closer to me. “We’re taking advantage of our local history, you know? It’s good for business.”

“I’m sure it does.” I glance behind me at the display windows, where I can see the tourists ambling down the street.

“I always told you our ancestors might’ve been more than just simple village healers.” Miranda smirks at Sylvia. “They whisper that real magic once flowed through Shadow Glen’s veins.”

“Mom,” Sylvia says, laughing. “Our ancestors came to America in the Second World War.”

“So? They could have been witches before . Maybe they moved here because of the magic in the place.”

I laugh, then press a kiss to Miranda's cheek. She walks with me toward the counter, listing all the stores that changed names and all the new stores that opened as tourists began showing up more often.

My hometown is obsessed with Halloween and I didn't even know.

I glance over my shoulder to search for Sylvia. She has wandered over to a display of marble statues. Or icons. They're rather... phallic. Syl pokes at one of the largest icons. It wobbles precariously, and she yanks her hand back with a yelp. I press my lips together to keep the laughter at bay.

"Cordelia? Is that you?" A familiar voice cuts through the shop. My stomach plummets.

Oh no. It's too soon. I was ready to meet her, but not in the first hour!

I turn to see my cousin Vivian emerge from behind a bookshelf, her green eyes wide. She must have been in the plush chair. I completely missed her.

My cousin is as different from me as Sylvia. Vivian Dallimore powerwalks toward me, her auburn curls bouncing. She's always been athletic, but she's on the thin side now. Perhaps nerves because of the wedding.

She rushes over to hug me. "I thought I heard your voice! So glad you could make it back for the wedding."

I return her hug, searching for Sylvia. My best friend approaches, her shoulders already tightening with tension. Sylvia would never be rude in front of her mother, but she doesn't hide her feelings. Her face twists as if she had smelled something rotten.

“Hi, Vivian,” I greet back, letting go. “Sure I wouldn’t miss your wedding.” I truly wouldn’t—if she wasn’t getting married to my ex, who cheated on me with her. If she hadn’t told me a dozen times that I should understand that she was such a better match for Marcus...

Vivian eyes my sweater with a barely concealed smirk. “You’re always so soft to hug. I like how you never dress up, you know? You never try too hard.” She sighs. “You’re such an inspiration. To not depend on other people’s opinions.”

Heat floods my cheeks and I tug at the soft wool self-consciously. Leave it to Vivian to make a thinly veiled insult the first minute we meet. Sylvia rolls her eyes so far back she looks possessed.

Vivian doesn’t miss it. She plasters a smile onto her face. “Hi, Sylvia. Long time, no see.”

Sylvia crosses her arms and doesn’t reply. Miranda pokes her waist, but it’s no use. Sylvia doesn’t hide her feelings.

Vivian doesn’t seem fazed. “So, you bringing a plus one to the wedding?” She continues, twirling a glossy curl around her finger. “Someone who’s not Sylvia, of course.” She giggles. “Marcus’s parents have invited Miranda, so I’m guessing Sylvia is her plus one.”

Sylvia bristles. “You know, a woman doesn’t need a man to feel complete,” my best friend cuts in, coming to stand beside me. “And who says Lia would bring a guy, anyway? Maybe she has a lovely lady waiting in the wings. Would you have a problem with that?”

Vivian laughs, but there’s no warmth in it. “Oh, Sylvia, always the raging feminist. I’m not judging! It’s just, well... Cordelia’s never been much for romance, has she?”

Shame slinks up the back of my neck and I silently will the floorboards swallow me whole. It's one thing to be chronically single and I don't hate it... but it's another to have your cousin gleefully point it out.

Vivian has always been like this. She 's the one who betrayed me. Who ended our friendship by choosing a man over the trust we had. And yet, she's never satisfied. For some reason, she needs to put me down to feel good.

And I'm getting tired of that.

"Actually," the words tumble out before I can stop them, "my boyfriend is coming to the wedding. He's just arriving later."

Miranda squeals, smiling at the piece of news. Sylvia freezes. Her eyes grow wide as saucers. But when I see the disappointment on Vivian's face, I can't help but plow ahead, heart hammering against my ribs.

"Yep, got a date. He's very tall and handsome... and totally into me." What am I saying? I grab onto my hips to stop my hands from shaking. I paste on what I hope is a relaxed, genuine smile. "You'll meet him at the wedding, don't worry."

Vivian blinks, clearly taken aback, but recovers quickly. "Well, I can't wait to meet this mystery man." She smiles, sickly sweet. "He must be... quite the catch."

I swallow hard, the lie settling like a stone in my stomach. What have I done? I'm dateless, hopelessly single...

And I've just promised to conjure up Prince Charming in a matter of days. My shoulders droop as Vivian walks out. I'm in desperate need of a miracle.

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CHAPTER 3

CORDELIA

By the time we walk into Miranda's house, my cheeks are hurting from laughing at Sylvia's creative ways of insulting Vivian without setting her mom off. We drag our suitcases into the foyer and I have to balance on the wall to catch my breath.

"What I mean is," Sylvia goes on, "Vivian's so impressive. Most people need to try hard to be mean, but for her, it just seems so natural." She lands the suitcase too close to my foot and I jump out of her way. "Unlike that hair of hers. She uses hashtag-natural-red-headed in her pictures; have you seen it? She's so fake."

"Chill," I say amid laughter. "I know you don't like her, but don't take it out on me! My foot's done nothing wrong!"

"I can't say I disagree," Miranda says, walking into the house and turning the lights on. "About her being mean. And that passive aggressiveness? It's such a cowardly move. But then she's marrying into the Thorne family and they're rich rich. I wouldn't get in trouble with them if I could avoid it."

I meet Sylvia's eyes. Miranda's right. Vivian is cruel and the Thorns are assholes, but they own the town. I wouldn't get in trouble with them at risk of hurting Miranda. Though Sylvia and I moved away, Miranda still lives and works here. She loves her little esoteric shop—she's always loved it. How could I ruin things for her because of an ex I didn't even love?

Sylvia takes the lead, pulling her suitcase into the living room. “I know, Mom. We won’t. It just drives me mad.” She waves at me. “She stabbed Lia in the back for some man and now she treats Lia as if she were the one doing the stealing.”

Miranda waves this off. “She’s insecure, that’s all. Once a cheater, always a cheater. She can’t trust Marcus, so she blames Lia.” She raises her hands and flaps them around in the air as if cleaning the energy. “Let’s focus on the good stuff!” Miranda sweeps into the kitchen, her long skirts swishing. She flashes us a mysterious smile. “I have a surprise waiting. Homemade lasagna. You girls go grab a shower and I’ll warm it up.” She winks at me. “Welcome home.”

Miranda’s house envelops me like a warm hug, the faint aroma of sandalwood tickling my nose. Candles wait to be lit up in adorned sconces. The fluffy rug in front of the sofa is new, as is the TV. She’s painted a wall dark green and hung black picture frames in it. It couldn’t get more witchy. More magical.

But it’s not home, is it? Mom always had money trouble, so we moved around quite a lot between neighboring towns. Then, after she passed, I moved in with Miranda and Sylvia, and they’ve always done their best to make me feel at home. This is not on them. I know I’m being ungrateful, but... it’s not the same.

It’s not mine .

I roll my suitcase across the hardwood floors, the wheels rumbling, as I make my way to my old bedroom. Pushing open the door, I’m transported back in time. Movie posters still plaster the pale lavender walls, a weird mix of Mean Girls and Evil Dead. Sheer white curtains billow at the windows, cracked open an inch. My bookshelf overflows with books from my YA era, from Cassandra Clare to Lauren Kate and Richelle Mead.

I heave my suitcase onto the bed, the floral quilt crinkling. I’m almost done putting

my clothes away when Sylvia walks in. Her dark hair is pulled up into a bun peppered in water droplets. She's changed into her fleece pajamas, her face fresh from the shower. The mattress squeaks as Sylvia flops down beside it dramatically. She rolls her eyes to the ceiling.

"Can you believe Vivian? She's so annoying!" she continues the subject as if fifteen minutes haven't passed. "I can't believe Mom convinced us this was a good idea. Going to the wedding. I don't want to be the bigger person or whatever." She sulks.

"Well, it's too late now. We're here. Besides, you heard Vivian bragging. She probably would've gone on and on about how I was too scared to show up." I shrug. "Damned if I do, damned if I don't."

"Yeah, but that's the other thing!" Sylvia sits up, hugging a pillow to her chest. Her eyebrows draw together. "Now that you told her you have a boyfriend, we'll have to find a way out of that lie, too. What were you thinking, Lia?"

Heat floods my cheeks as I put the empty suitcase away and sit next to Syl. "I don't know, I panicked!"

"I noticed! I know you were upset at the betrayal, as you should, but this was years ago. And I thought you weren't looking for a boyfriend."

"I'm not." Definitely not. "But she's always trying to one-up me. For a change, I wanted to see the disappointment on her face." I trail off, fidgeting with the hem of my sweater.

Sylvia studies me, her gaze penetrating. "Lia. Babe." She sits up and grabs my hand. "You know Mom's right. Vivian is insecure and jealous." She squeezes my hand, her lips twisting into something wicked. "That said, I loved the disappointed look on her face."

I chuckle. “For a second, I thought you were going to say something serious. Like how society primes us for female competition.”

“That’s all true, but feminism doesn’t force me to like all women. I respect Vivian as a woman, even though I want to slap her.” Sylvia leaps up from the bed, her face brightening. “Wait, I have an idea! Give me one sec.” She dashes out of the room, her footsteps echoing down the hall. I hear her scream, “Mom! Where is—” and then nothing.

I barely have time to raise an eyebrow before she’s back, slightly out of breath. In her hands, she clutches a thick, worn book and a strange object wrapped in cloth.

“Look!” Sylvia brandishes the book, and I glimpse the title embossed in gold on the cover: Love Spells & Rituals.

“No,” I immediately say. “No, no, no. We’re not going into your mom’s books again.” We used to do that all the time when we were teenagers and I still remember the tummy aches we had trying magic potions.

Syl ignores me and sets the book down on the bed. “This one we never tried before. Mom wouldn’t let us, remember? And this...” She unwraps the cloth to reveal a statue about the size of my hand.

Oh, I remember her poking it back in the store. This one is not white marble, but an earthy green jade. The base is rounded and broad, while the middle section gently curves and tapers. Near the top, it widens slightly, adorned with etched spirals or delicate leaf-like patterns that seem to unfurl upwards.

“What’s that?” I ask, arching an eyebrow. It’s unmistakably phallic.

“A fertility icon,” Syl replies, putting it in my hand. “For the love spell. It’ll make it

more powerful.”

My fingers close around it. The surface is perfectly smooth and cold to the touch. I can’t help but chuckle. “Really, Syl? A love spell?”

“Why not?” Sylvia waggles her eyebrows at me. “It’s worth a shot, right? Unless you have any other bright ideas.”

I heave a sigh, feeling the weight of my predicament settle on my shoulders. Do I believe it’ll work? No. But the other option is dating apps and I’m not eager to try those. I don’t even think they’d work here.

“Okay, fine. But first...” I put the icon down and shoot to my feet. My stomach rumbles with hunger and I’m too sober to attempt love spells. “I’m going to need some of Miranda’s lasagna. And wine. Lots of wine.”

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CHAPTER 4

CORDELIA

I trace the lines of the circle on my bedroom floor, the white chalk stark against the dark hardwood floors. Tiny specks cling to my fluffy pajamas as I work. My vision is a bit hazy and I have to re-read every rune three times before writing it down. Miranda's book is open next to my knee as I read from it.

My stomach's still full of delicious lasagna, and I'm in that stage of drunkenness that makes you sleepy and heavy and comfortable. I glance at Sylvia. She snores in my bed, dark hair fanned across the pillow, one arm dangling off the edge. We had dinner, and we chatted and drank, and then Miranda went off to bed and Sylvia said it was the perfect time to work some spells.

I can't believe my best friend convinced me of this. Drunkenly writing runes into the hardwood floors at three in the morning. Witching hour indeed. I sigh. A love spell. And I'm not even sure I'd like it to work.

Sylvia mumbles something unintelligible and rolls over, burrowing deeper under my floral quilt. I chuckle and return to my task, inscribing the runes along the outer edge of the circle. The picture in the book is oddly beautiful. I consult the yellowed pages, squinting to make out the faded ink.

Done. I put the chalk down and slap my hands together. Now, the icon. I pick it up.

It's very... solid. I eye the appendage-shaped statue with doubt before placing it in the

center of the circle. “This better not summon an incubus or something.”

Satisfied with my amateur spell-casting setup, I pad over to the bed and poke Sylvia’s cheek until she grumbles awake.

She blinks at me blearily. “Is it done?”

“Yes, no thanks to you.” I cross my arms. “Get up. If something goes horribly wrong, you’re facing the consequences with me.”

She grumbles, yawns, and stretches languorously before stumbling to her feet. “Go on then, Sabrina. Do the thing.”

“If I’m Sabrina, are you Salem?” I grin as I retrieve the book and stand at the edge of the circle.

Syl makes claw hands. “Meow, bitch.” She scoots closer to me. “I’d claw at Vivian’s fake face. She looks like Temu Kim Kardashian.”

“No, she doesn’t,” I say, though I laugh. “That’s so cruel. You get so cruel when you’re drunk.”

“The filter disappears.” She leans back in bed, propping her hands behind her. “Go on, I can’t wait to meet your very tall, very handsome boyfriend.”

I stick my tongue out at her and flip to the appropriate page, clearing my throat. It’s not easy to read the small print with this much alcohol in my blood. The words feel strange and heavy on my tongue as I begin the incantation. Sylvia watches with rapt attention, her eyes glinting in the dim light.

As I speak the last phrase, a frisson of... something... skitters up my spine. I shiver. Is

it working? I keep going, my voice going stronger and stronger until...

Nothing.

Nothing happens. The circle doesn't light up; there's no weird breeze, sound, or anything.

I snap the book shut with a sigh. "Well, that was anticlimactic."

Sylvia pouts. "Give it a minute! Maybe your soulmate has to, like, receive the message."

"Doubtful." I scoff. "Love isn't some grand, mystical force, Syl. It's messy and complicated and overrated."

She gasps, pressing a hand to her chest in mock affront. "You take that back! Love is beautiful and pure and?—"

"Fictional?" I raise an eyebrow, then shrug. "It's alright. I'm perfectly content being invisible to the opposite sex. Means my heart stays intact."

"Oh Lia," Sylvia sighs, looping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me to bed. "You'll meet the right someone one day. I know it. Maybe the magic worked and we'll meet them tomorrow down the block! You never know!"

"I think I'll stick to my romance novels, thanks. Less risk of disappointment that way."

We sit there in silence, staring at the decidedly unmagical circle. No spark, no flash of light, no sudden appearance of a devastatingly handsome stranger. I'm not surprised.

But as I flick off the lamp and crawl into bed beside Sylvia, a tiny, treacherous part of me can't help it.

I can't help but hope she's right.

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CHAPTER 5

CORDELIA

Warm light streams through the curtains as I blink awake, my mind fuzzy and head throbbing dully from last night's wine. Fumbling for my phone on the nightstand, I squint at the screen—10:47 am. Wow, I overslept.

There's a text from Sylvia on the screen. From almost three hours ago.

Syl: mom roped me into helping at the store. busy month apparently, now the town is a halloween hub or something. pretty sure the wedding was just a ploy for me to work for free.

I chuckle, then squint at the screen as I type back an answer.

Cordelia: hey just woke up. you want some help there?

Her reply comes in seconds.

Syl: hell no. i love you too much to do this to you.

I snort, hauling myself out of bed with a groan. The circle is still intact. I can't believe I managed to draw all this while drunk. I stumble to the bathroom to pee.

After showering, I put on comfy lounging clothes. It's my first day of vacation in forever. There's no way I'm dressing up. I tug on my pink velvet Juicy pants and an

old tank top that reveals too much cleavage but has impressive support. My breasts are not small; comfort and support hardly go hand in hand in this category. I apply some oil to the tips of my blond hair, then lots of moisturizer on my face.

Back in bed, I grab my Kindle, eager to lose myself in a steamy romance and forget the world for a while. I've got a month of blissful hibernation planned, alternating between my bed and cafes, with a long Tbr list to go through.

From bed, I glance at the circle in the middle of the bedroom. Maybe I should clean that up first. Did Miranda see it in the morning? I should totally clean that up. It wouldn't be the first time Miranda saw us doing this, but we're almost thirty. We should have grown out of it.

I shoot to my feet again before getting too comfortable. My eyes fall on the strange fertility icon, lying sideways in the middle of the circle. One of us must have kicked it. I tilt my head, considering. In the light of day, the "fertility icon" looks an awful lot like a stone dildo.

I bite my lip, a flutter of arousal stirring in my core.

No . No, Cordelia, for fuck's sake. There's no way I'm thinking this.

But what if?

No. No, no, no . I don't want to be one of those people who end up in the ER with a weird thing stuck inside them. I don't want to come up with a ludicrous lie no one will believe. There's no way I'm thinking about doing this.

But surely, if I sanitized it, and then lubed it up, it should be okay? I only have to be careful. Don't put it too far up. It's just that... The texture looks like it would feel so good. No human cock could ever feel like that.

Fuck it.

Rummaging in my toiletry bag, I pull out my bottle of lube. When was the last time I had a proper orgasm? Too damn long.

After sanitizing the icon as well as I can, I bury myself under the covers and kick my pants down. I squeeze the lube into my palm and slick up the stone cock. My clit tingles when I brush my fingertips over it. I press the icon against my entrance.

Oh, yes . I can feel the texture. I gasp as I slide it inside, my walls clenching greedily around the smooth, unyielding hardness. My toes curl in delight.

Slowly, I work it in and out, my arousal building with each deliberate stroke. I circle my clit, increasing the pace, then slowing it down. Teasing. Pleasure coils tighter and tighter in my belly as the icon seems to grow warmer against my flesh, pulsing with an uncanny heat.

I throw my head back against the pillow, hips lifting to meet each thrust, chasing my rapidly approaching peak. Pleasure lights up my nerve endings. That must be why the statue seems to vibrate ever so slightly.

With a sharp cry, I hurtle over the edge into ecstasy, my inner muscles spasming. Pleasure floods my mind. Gasping for breath, I pull the icon free and let it tumble to the bed.

That's when I see it—the icon is glowing. My mind is fussy with aftershocks. I catch my breath, scowling.

The circle on the floor lights up.

“Oh, shit,” I gasp, yanking my pants back up. What's happening? What's happening?

With my fumbling, I kick the icon out of the bed. It rolls, covered in my arousal, to the center of the circle. Electricity arcs and pops. My jaw drops open in shock. My heartbeat skyrockets.

A massive clawed hand emerges from the center of the circle, followed by a muscular, red arm.

I want to scream. I tell myself to run. Frozen, I watch in mute horror as the hulking figure rises and rises, massive and absurd, wisps of shadows twining around an imposing frame.

Burning black eyes lock onto mine as a slow, wicked smile spreads across a sensuous mouth.

“Well, well,” the demon purrs, his voice dark as sin. “Looks like I’ve been summoned.”

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CHAPTER 6

CORDELIA

A towering figure stands in the center of my chalk circle. The electricity dies down until it's only a buzzing by his feet. He's very tall , over seven feet tall. Plus, gleaming obsidian horns. His four muscular arms cross over his broad chest. His skin is dark red, his eyes are black. He's in granite dress pants and a black form-fitting t-shirt. Shaggy black hair frames a chiseled face. My mind reels.

Am I dreaming?

“What in the nine hells?” His deep voice resonates through my bones. He doesn't seem mad, merely curious as he studies my bedroom.

“I'm dreaming,” I say.

He glances at me with an arched brow. “No, I don't think you are, Witch.”

“I'm no witch.”

He motions with a massive finger to his feet, where he still stands amid the circle. “This tells me otherwise.”

I shake my head over and over until I'm forced to stop before I hurl at his feet. “No. No, this can't be happening.” I scoot further away from him in bed. “Who are you?”

His onyx eyes narrow. “I have many names. Usually, the Summoner knows one of them.” He cocks his head, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. “Impressive, for a mortal. Summoning me is no small feat. This is actually a first.”

The book. Where is the book?

I find it on my nightstand. I grab the spell book and open it. “No, no, no,” I mutter, frantically flipping through the weathered pages. “This wasn’t a summoning spell. It was supposed to be—” I snap my mouth shut, heat rushing to my cheeks. “This is all wrong.”

He looks down at the circle. “Your rune-writing is atrocious. No wonder the spell went awry.”

I huff, snapping the book shut. “Excuse me, my handwriting is perfectly legible!”

“To a blind man, perhaps. Though I must admit, for the spell to have worked at all, you must have some witch blood running through your veins. What was it for?”

I shiver as his words sink in. “It was just... it was supposed to help me f-find...” My voice trails off as embarrassment constricts my throat. I can’t believe it. There’s no way. Did I really make a spell work, only to get it so wrong that I summoned a literal demon ?

“Love?” He finishes, his lips curling into a mocking grin.

My face goes hot. I flip through the pages again with trembling hands, desperate for a way to undo this cosmic mishap.

“Can you at least tell me your name so I know what’s going on?” I ask without looking at the huge red monster standing in the middle of my bedroom.

I feel his stare for a solid minute before he replies, “Call me Levi.”

I stop and glance up. “Levi? Seriously?”

But he’s not looking at me anymore. He kneels and reaches out, plucking the small stone icon from the edge of the circle. My heart leaps into my throat as I lunge for it, my fingers grazing the cool surface before he lifts it out of reach.

No . There’s no way this can get this much worse!

“Well, well,” he purrs, turning the icon over in his hands. It glistens in the morning light. His nostrils flare. “Aren’t you a naughty little witch?”

Humiliation burns through me as he dangles the evidence of what I’ve done above my head. He’s too damn tall. I won’t jump like a kid. “Give it back,” I plead, my voice barely above a whisper.

He lowers the icon, his eyes glinting with amusement and something else—something darker, more primal. “You know, most people opt for blood when conducting summoning rituals. But this...” He leans in, his hot breath fanning across my face. “This is far better.”

I swallow hard, my pulse pounding in my ears. “I didn’t mean to?—”

“Oh, but you did.” He places the fertility icon in my palm, a grin opening on his weirdly handsome face. “And now, darling, we are bound. Your desires, your deepest longings, have summoned me to your side.”

Panic rises like bile in my throat. “What?”

“That’s right.” He grins. “You just bound yourself to me, Witch.”

Bound? To a literal demon?

No .

I turn around and run out of the house.

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CHAPTER 7

LEVIATHAN

There were many things on my to-do list for this morning. In my line of work, there comes a time when few things surprise you. But being accidentally summoned by a pretty little witch in tight pants and mouth-watering tits?

That wasn't on my list.

The front door bursts open and the little witch stumbles in, her blonde hair in disarray, her fantastic tits bouncing. Her eyes, bright blue like an apatite stone, widen as they land on me. She halts, breath catching in her throat.

"You're still here." Her voice quivers.

"You didn't break the circle, little witch. Where else would I be?"

She swallows hard, her chest heaving. Damn, I'd love to bury my face between those perfect breasts. A demon in my position could have any tits in his face, but I'm quickly growing obsessed with these. Even if humans and demons rarely mix.

A second human walks in. This one is dark-haired and tanned, shorter than the witch. I glance at her, then back at the golden-haired curvy goddess in front of me.

"Shit, Cordelia," the newcomer says. "I thought you had hit your head in the toilet or something, but no. You were speaking the truth."

Cordelia . That's her name. Beautiful. It used to be more popular. I remember a time when it felt like half the girls were called Cordelia and the other half were Ophelia. I remember how many Cordelias and Ophelias we used to receive every day.

“Who are you?” asks the newcomer.

“A demon,” Cordelia says, grabbing a book. Her grimoire, perhaps? “He looks different since I left him, though.”

“Different?” asks the newcomer. “How so?”

I put on a human facade, of course. When you're rudely summoned out of your desk in the middle of a workday, you don't have time to put on an image that humans would find more palatable. Since Cordelia ran off, she gave me enough time to do it.

It's not much. Though I look human now—no horns or claws; only two arms, which is sad and weak; and lighter skin color. Just enough to stop humans from screaming my head out.

“He looked literally like a demon when I left,” says Cordelia, motioning for me. “He had, like, horns. And, and... Arms.” She glares at me. “Look. I don't know what you did to look different. And I shouldn't have summoned you. It was a mistake.”

I click my tongue. “Ah, but you did summon me. And now we're stuck together, bound by that little spell of yours.”

Her brow furrows. “No. No, there has to be a way to undo it. To send you back.”

“Pity. Afraid not.” I examine my nails, fighting back a grin. “You're stuck with me. But don't worry, I'll be a perfect gentleman. Unless you prefer otherwise.”

I wink and she flushes scarlet. Sylvia bursts into laughter behind her.

“This is... fascinating.” Sylvia strides in, looking me up and down with keen interest.

“An actual demon. In the flesh. What’s Hell like?”

I wave a dismissive hand. “Too warm. Dreary. Full of whiny souls. Quite dull, really. I’ve been in charge far too long. Even demons need a break.”

“Sylvia, don’t talk to him,” Cordelia hisses, flipping through the book. “He might spell you or something.”

Sylvia grabs Cordelia’s arm, grinning. “Lia. Babe. You accidentally summoned and bound a demon. We can find a way to undo this. You’re magic, bitch!” She shakes Cordelia’s arm, a little too excited. “Oh my God, we’re going to have so much fun!”

Cordelia shakes her head. “Fun? Fun? A demon , Sylvia. He’s going to murder us in our sleep.”

I scoff. “Please. That would be so uncouth. Everyone knows you don’t mess with your hosts. And as long as no one annoys me too much, I can promise to not maim anyone. It’s too much effort, anyway. And blood stains.”

Cordelia stares daggers at me. It only makes me want to rile her up even more. “I can’t believe this is happening.” She turns to Sylvia. “I just want him gone!”

I spread my arms wide. “You’re the one who dragged me here with your ludicrous rune-writing.”

Sylvia snickers. “Lia. Is this all because of your handwriting? Please tell me he’s telling the truth.”

Cordelia shoots me a withering glare. Gods, she's even lovelier when she's pissed. There's a fire in her, simmering just under that sweet surface. I'd like to coax it out; see her burn.

"Listen," Cordelia hisses, standing at the very edge of the summoning circle. "I get it. I summoned you and bound you and whatever. But this is not permanent. You are going back."

Sylvia bounces on her toes. "So, are you going to, you know, wreak havoc? Claim souls? Do demony things?"

I snort, shoving a hand through my hair. "Please. That's below me. And frankly, I can't be arsed. I'm on vacation. Forcibly, but still."

Cordelia looks like she wants to combust. Sylvia pats her shoulder.

"There, there, babe. We'll sort this out. He said he won't do anything evil, so it should be okay." Sylvia steps forward and, with the tip of her shoe, wipes off a piece of the outer circle, breaking the spell and freeing me.

Oh. That was simple.

Cordelia jumps . "What are you doing?" she cries out.

"He won't hurt us, babe! Besides," she turns around and ambles out of the room, "maybe we can convince him to rid us of Vivian!"

She dashes off. Cordelia's jaw clenches. I smirk at her. "Who's Vivian?"

She huffs, folding her arms across her chest. It only serves to push her breasts up higher. Glorious.

“Not your business, Demon .”

“Leviathan.” I inspect my nails again. “Call me Leviathan. Or Levi. Or ‘oh god’, if you prefer. I’m flexible.”

Her mouth drops open, a blush working up her cheeks again. I chuckle. She’s too easy to fluster. Yeah, I’m going to have fun with this one.

CHAPTER 8

LEVIATHAN

S ometimes, I get so caught up with work that I forget to check on how humans are faring while they're alive. I walk down the quaint street, observing how some things don't change. Sure, the clothes are different, and their vehicles have changed, but they still walk around in small groups, laughing and smiling, and there are little humans running around, and dogs.

They've had dogs for thousands of years. I wonder if they don't get bored with it. I would have domesticated something more interesting by now. Like a tiger.

The mortals' chatter fades to a distant hum. The weather is much nicer up here. It's cool instead of Hell's permanently warm atmosphere. The blue sky is so bright it stings my eyes. Not bad at all for a short-term stay.

The city itself is small, but well taken care of. There are trees everywhere . I missed those. Hell doesn't have trees, obviously. There's no sun. And these trees are golden and brown and orange. It's a dazzling sight.

Almost as good as the blond rushing next to me to keep up with my pace.

"Leviathan, wait!" Cordelia's voice cuts through my musings, her hurried footsteps pattering behind me. She quickens her pace to match my long strides, cheeks flushed and chest heaving. "You can't just go wandering around town. What if someone figures out who you are?"

I scoff, pausing next to a window. “Cordelia. The only way these humans could figure that out is if I let them. My magic is strong. No one can see through it.” I motion for the window. “They see me the way I want them to.”

Cordelia meets my gaze in the reflection. Assuming a human facade is easy for any demon. I maintain my features, my height, and my body shape, but I conceal the things that would make them fear me. My red skin, the horns, the second pair of arms. For the humans passing us, I’m just a very tall man. Even my clothes blend well.

Cordelia does a double-take. I don’t miss that, so I let myself do the same with her. She’s changed out of her top into a sweater. A pity. I already miss the sight of her cleavage. Her blond hair is down and damn, it looks so damn soft. For some reason, it makes me want to run my fingers through them.

She has the temper to bite my arm off if I attempted it, so I don’t.

She looks away, twisting her lips. “I don’t know. This doesn’t sound safe. And I don’t trust you. What if you hurt someone?”

“That would be a diplomatic incident too nasty for me to handle,” I tell her. A demon attacking humans in the daylight? Worse, someone in my position? I’d have trouble up my ass in two seconds flat and we don’t need another war this soon. I start walking again.

Cordelia scrambles to follow, her eyes wide. “Well, if there’s such a risk, shouldn’t we head back home?”

I shoot a glance at her. “I’m not one of your mortal pets to be confined. I’m offering you a truce, Cordelia. No chaos, no destruction. Just a moment’s respite from my responsibilities. That’s all.”

She bites her plump lower lip, but she doesn't look convinced. I watch, amused, as war wages behind those bright blue eyes. Finally, she sighs, shoulders slumping in defeat. "Fine. But any funny business and we're out of there. Got it?"

"You have my word if, " and I raise a finger toward her, "you take me somewhere to eat. That's the best way to absorb a place's culture."

Cordelia curls her nose in confusion. "You're really looking at this like a vacation."

"I told you that." A door opens and closes up ahead. A rich, warm scent wafts its way to me. "There. That smells good."

A sign above the door reads The Golden Cup . I open the door and motion Cordelia in, stepping inside after her. The air is filled with a rich aroma, with hints of something sweet. The interior is sleek, boasting polished marble counters and golden accents that catch the light on an opulent display. The store is very large, though still quite full. Soft music plays in the background. The gentle clinking of fine china joins the chatter of mortals as we walk in. Displays showcase pieces of breads and colorful cakes. Yes, I remember that. Humans, bread, and dogs go way back. Some things never change.

I make a beeline toward the mortal behind the counter, but Cordelia grabs my arm. Her cool fingers release a small charge against my skin. I tense, but don't pull back.

"There's a line," she says, pointing at a line of people.

"So?"

"So, we take the line." She pulls me toward it. I let her. I could argue a demon in my position doesn't do lines, but then what's the point of visiting other places if you will not blend in?

“What do you drink?” I ask her after we take the last spot in line.

Cordelia pulls a small metal rectangle from her pants pocket. “During fall, pumpkin spice latte.”

I curl my nose at her. “I don’t know what any of those words mean.”

Cordelia presses her lips as if stopping herself from laughing. “Do you know what fall means? The earth rotates around the sun and, depending on the angle and distance to the sun, we have seasons...”

I roll my eyes. “Witch, I know what seasons are.”

She jerks. “Don’t call me that,” she hisses. “Cordelia. Call me Cordelia.”

“What I meant,” I go on, “is that I remember humans drinking water and ale and wine. This doesn’t smell like any of them. What do you drink if not those?”

“Coffee. Juices. Made from fruit.”

“Coffee is made from what fruit?”

“Coffee is not a fruit. It’s a grain. A seed. We roast it and brew it in hot water.”

“That’s...” Actually fascinating. And it does smell good.

The person behind the counter calls us next. She gives me a once-over, then stops and looks again, her eyes widening. Cordelia steps in front of me.

“Hi!” Cordelia says, with much more cheerfulness than she’s shown me. “He’ll have a large Black Cold Brew. No sugar. And I’ll take a medium pumpkin spice latte with

whipped cream and oat milk, please.”

I watch the cashier give her a total, and then Cordelia taps her metal rectangle to a box. I’ve missed a lot on human technology. I recognize nothing. There’s no exchange of cash, but I imagine that’s what the metal thing is for. Cordelia guides me aside. It’s easy to find a spot to wait. The humans step back and away when they look up at me.

My appearance is that of a human, yes, but humans were prey for many thousands of years. There’s still that fight-or-flight instinct inside them. They still have that gut feeling to distinguish a predator.

Cordelia leans in, voice lowered. “So... when you say we’re bound together. Do you mean, like, a deal? Did I accidentally... sell my soul or something?”

I let out a bark of laughter, drawing curious glances from the other patrons. “No, I don’t engage in such base pursuits. My role is... supervisory.”

She nods slowly, but she doesn’t seem convinced. I give that to her. She’s careful.

Except for accidentally summoning me.

The person behind the counter calls Cordelia’s name. She walks back to me with two cups—a paper one she keeps and a transparent one she offers me. The cup is flimsy, so I have to hold it carefully.

“What’s this?” I ask her.

“Your cold brew. My ex used to say that’s what men like.”

I flare my nostrils. Ex ? Why are we talking about an ex-partner? “I meant the

material of this cup.”

“Oh! It’s plastic. It’s made from oil. Not sure how, though. We use it for a lot of things. Too many things, in fact.”

Alright, that’s an interesting piece of knowledge. I bring the cup to my nose. It doesn’t smell as good as the rest of the store. Maybe because it’s cold. Bringing it to my lips, I sip.

And it takes everything in me not to spit it.

“This is foul,” I spit, grimacing at the cup. “Fucking hell, who would drink this?”

“Shh!” Cordelia takes the cup from my hand, her eyes wide but her lips curling. “You don’t have to scream.”

My lips curl downward. “Fuck, I think I’ll taste that shit forever. It’s stained my tongue.”

Cordelia chuckles as she puts the cup away. “I should have ordered a small.” She looks up at me, her cheeks pink. “How am I supposed to know what you like?”

Shit, I need to get rid of this taste. It tastes fucking awful. I pluck her paper cup from her hands, ignoring her indignant “Hey!” and take a hearty gulp.

Ah, much better. Much better . Creamy, sweet, with a hint of spice. Warmth spreads down my throat and across my chest. I give a satisfied nod.

“This,” I say, pointing at the cup. “This is good.” I take another gulp.

Cordelia stares at me, more surprised than when she saw my demon form. “Sure, help

yourself,” Cordelia grumbles, but there’s no actual heat behind it. Amusement dances in her eyes. “I’ll grab another one for me.”

With drinks in hand, we walk toward the doors. I hold it open for Cordelia. She steps out onto the sidewalk and almost immediately collides with a couple. I steady Cordelia with a hand on her back as she mumbles an apology.

“Cordelia?” The woman, red-haired with sharp features and a forced smile, looks between us with barely concealed shock. “Hi! Who’s your... friend?”

I size up the pair. Are they Cordelia’s friends? Both are tall and thin and both have green eyes. The woman looks strangely at Cordelia. She reeks of envy, her gaze colored with thinly veiled disdain. The man, presumably her relative since they look so much alike, has brown hair and wears a strange combination of pants that look too short and a shirt that looks too tight.

“Vivian, Marcus, hi!” Cordelia’s voice pitches up, a telltale flush creeping up her neck. Something tingles down my spine. She doesn’t look comfortable at all. “Yeah, um... this is... Levi. Yeah, this is Levi.”

The two look up at me. They have to tilt their heads back. I say nothing, arching an eyebrow at them.

Marcus clears his throat. “Nice to meet you, man.” He looks down at Cordelia. “Long time no see, Lia. How are you doing?” He smiles, but it’s as false as Vivian’s. His voice is warm and smooth, but I can’t help but feel there’s something wrong with these people.

“Good,” she responds. “I’m doing okay. This is the first vacation I have in a while, so I’m trying to enjoy it.”

“Yeah...” Marcus nods. “Good for you. Are you still working at that McDonald’s?”

Cordelia blinks. “Um, no. That was years ago. I’m a data engineer.”

Vivian laughs. “Data engineer? Is that even a real job?”

My patience is running thin. I don’t like these people. I don’t know what McDonald’s is or what a data engineer does, but I don’t like their tone of voice. When you work in a field like mine, you learn to smell lies.

“We should go,” I point out, my hand on Cordelia’s lower back. Leaving is the best way to get rid of these people without making Cordelia hate me. Not that her feelings matter—I’m just here on vacation—but her hatred would complicate things.

Cordelia nods. “Oh, of course. Nice seeing you two.”

“Wait,” Vivian calls. “You didn’t explain who you are,” she says, looking at me. “Are you new in town? Marcus and I have been traveling too much, so we miss newcomers all the time.”

I feel Cordelia tense beside me. My jaw ticks. “No, I’m with Cordelia.”

Vivian’s brows shoot up. “Really? What do you mean?” She places a hand on her chest in mock surprise. “You can’t be the mysterious boyfriend. You’re too out of her league.” She takes a beat. “Just kidding, of course,” she adds with a grin.

I curl my nose. “What’s wrong with you?”

Cordelia tenses even further. Vivian looks between Cordelia and Marcus. “What do you mean?” she asks.

Oh, I've had enough of this one. I lean down, capturing Vivian's gaze with a predatory smile. "I know you're jealous of Cordelia. It's pretty obvious you're an insecure girl who has to put others down to make you feel better. It must be hard knowing you'll never compare to her. You'll never have what she has."

Vivian's mouth drops open. Her face goes dark red. Marcus chokes on air. Cordelia makes a strangled sound beside me.

"I—Who the hell do you think you are?" Vivian sputters, cheeks blazing.

I open my mouth to reply but Cordelia beats me to it. She steps forward, linking her arm with mine and tilting her chin up.

"He's my boyfriend."

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CHAPTER 9

CORDELIA

My eyes flutter open to the soft glow of morning light filtering through the curtains. Stretching languidly, I sit up in bed, my blonde hair tousled from sleep. The faint sounds of chatter and laughter drift from the living room.

I'm in Miranda's home, in my old bedroom. Syl and I are visiting. There's an entire month ahead of books and coffee and dinner with the only two people I love in the world. There is nothing wrong with my life.

Yesterday was a bad dream. There's no way none of that happened. A weirdly long dream, but it's over now.

I slip out from under the covers and get up. There's no chalk circle on the hardwood floor. I scoff. Just a crazy dream. I leave the bedroom, aiming for the kitchen.

Rounding the corner, I freeze. There, sprawled on my couch in all his demonic glory, is Leviathan. His dark red skin gleams in the sunlight that pours from the windows. A pair of curved obsidian horns crown his head. Two of his four powerful arms are crossed behind his head as he watches the screen, utterly transfixed.

My heart skips. Apparently, it wasn't a dream.

Leviathan glances at me, then turns his head to stare. I don't know why he does this. His dark eyes are impossible to decode.

“What are you doing?” I blurt out.

He tilts his head, his gaze traveling down my body, for some reason. “Watching TV. Miranda showed me how to use it before she went to bed yesterday.” He turns away, his expression empty.

I sneak closer, peering at the TV.

“90 Days Fiancé?” A smirk tugs at my lips. This massive demon who could rip off my head with one hand, captivated by trashy reality TV. “You spent the whole night watching 90 Days Fiancé?”

“Have you ever watched it?”

“A few seasons. I heard this last one was especially cringeworthy.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Cringe?”

“Embarrassing.”

“Oh. I believe you then.” He narrows his eyes at the TV. “It’s a fascinating study on cross-cultural relationships. And if cultural differences weren’t enough problematic, you have language barriers. I’m amazed at how people can fall in love without understanding each other.” He shrugs. “Well, the ones who do fall in love. The power imbalance between some couples just reveals that humans still have unrealistic expectations.”

I stare back at him. “That’s... a way to put it.” And I only watched it to mock people. Gee.

Levi’s black eyes flick to me, a glint in their depths. “Well, I wasn’t about to spend

all night staring at the ceiling. We demons don't need sleep like you fragile mortals. We exist between planes. Besides," he gestures at the TV, "what better way to learn about human relationships than watching this compelling drivel?"

I roll my eyes, stifling a chuckle. "Alright, then. Since you're not a dream, I'm going to shower, then head out to grab some coffee."

He narrows his eyes at my dream observation but drops it without a second thought. "Excellent idea. I'll go with you."

Levi springs up from the couch with inhuman grace the moment I walk back into the living room. I showered and changed into leggings and an oversized hoodie. That's my usual go-to: comfortable and oversized enough to keep attention away from my body.

Levi still looks. His eyes grow hooded when he does a double take.

"What's wrong?" I ask him, looking down. The first time we met, I was wearing my Juicy Couture pants and a revealing tank top. This is nothing like that.

Levi shrugs and sticks his hands into his pants pockets. "Ready to go?" he asks, ignoring my question.

I arch an eyebrow. "Take your human form."

"I'm wounded by your lack of faith." With a dramatic sigh, Levi's form shimmers and shifts. In a heartbeat, he stands before me in his human guise—all 7 feet of muscle, tousled black hair, and piercing obsidian eyes. A tight black T-shirt and dark jeans hug his frame. He spreads his two arms. "Acceptable?"

"That's impressive," I tell him, making my way to the door. "I wish I could do that."

I glance over my shoulder. “Can you, like, change your body, too? Grow taller, shorter, or thinner?”

“Sure. Any disguise. I prefer to keep it simple.”

Lucky bastard. I would love to change my body here and there. It would be great to have a different hairstyle every day. No more regretting a bob the second I cut it.

Together, we step out of the house and start down the block. I aim downtown, but not to The Golden Cup. They’re too expensive and I prefer smaller cafes. Also, they’re owned by Marcus’s family and I don’t want to give his family more money. They surely don’t need it.

The weather is perfect again. Blue skies, crisp cool air. A few leaves have started to fall.

Levi and I walk in silence for a block, then pause to cross the street. A couple passes us, fingers intertwined, their smiles wide. They peek at Levi, then move on.

“So,” Levi glances at me sidelong, “care to explain yesterday’s little charade with those weirdbrothers?”

I frown. “Brothers?”

“Yeah. Outside the cafe.”

I snort. “They’re a couple.”

He arches an eyebrow. “I thought you humans had ruled out incest.”

I can’t help but laugh. “We did. They’re not brothers. Why did you think that?”

“They look a lot alike.”

“Do they? Well, they exercise a lot, so they’re both athletic. Marcus has hazel eyes, but Vivian’s are green. No, I don’t think they’re that much alike.”

“Perhaps all humans look similar to me,” he says, but he’s grinning.

So, I grin back. “Perhaps I would think the same of other demons, but I don’t care about meeting others, sorry.”

Levi takes a beat. “The charade?”

“What charade?” I look straight ahead, but heat creeps into my cheeks.

Of course I remember what I said. I’ve been changing the subject since that happened, avoiding it, but I’ll have to face it. The reason I did the spell was to get a boyfriend, even if a fake one, for the wedding.

“You said I’m your boyfriend.”

My face is on fire. I tuck a stray curl behind my ear. “It’s stupid, really. See, Marcus and Vivian are getting married soon. Marcus was my boyfriend all the way back in high school and Vivian is my cousin. She just... she makes me feel so inadequate sometimes. Like I’m failing at life because I’m still single. So I might have fibbed and said I was bringing someone...”

Levi’s brow furrows. “I don’t follow. Why lie? What does it matter if you attend this wedding alone? Is it forbidden?”

I sigh, watching a maple leaf flutter down toward us. How can I make him understand? Even I think it’s stupid and I’m human. “It’s not that simple. Vivian’s

always been the golden child, you know? Pretty, popular, successful. And here I am, 26 and single. Am I failing in life because of that? No. I have good friends. Miranda and Sylvia mean the world to me. My job is great and pays well. But sometimes, it feels like society will consider any woman a failure if they don't have a man and kids. No matter who they are. I just... I wanted to show Vivian I'm doing fine. That I'm not lacking."

Levi says nothing. We make it to the cafe in silence. When I look up, he's staring at me. Something flickers in Levi's eyes, there and gone too fast to decipher.

We make it to... The Witch's Brew, I guess. It used to be called Jimmy's, after the owner's grandfather, but I guess they also changed the name.

The Witch's Brew occupies a charming corner building on Main Street. As we step inside, the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans mingles with a hint of cinnamon and nutmeg. It makes me smile. They revamped the place, for sure, but I quite like it.

The soft glow of LED candles casts flickering shadows across wooden tables adorned with small potted plants. The gentle hum of chatter blends with the soothing sound of an enormous fireplace in the back. Shelves lined with old books, more potted plants, and small cauldrons take the walls.

Levi tags along as I order two pumpkin spice lattes and an assortment of muffins. We take a table in the back.

The moment we sit, he says, "I could accompany you. To this wedding."

I whip toward him so fast I almost drop the cup. "You—what?"

He shrugs, nonchalant. "Why not? You need a partner, and it's not like I've got anything better to do while I'm stuck topside with you." A hint of a smirk. "Unless

you'd rather endure your cousin's smugness alone..."

Indignation flares, but suspicion douses it. I narrow my eyes. "And I'm supposed to believe you're offering out of, what, the goodness of your shriveled demonic heart? What's your angle here, Levi?"

He presses a hand to his well-defined chest (not that I noticed) and blows a wounded scoff. "You wound me." Then, more seriously, "No angle. It simply seems a mutually beneficial arrangement. You get to one-up your vexing relative, and I get some much-needed entertainment. Besides, I've never been to a human wedding, and 90 Days Fiancé taught me they can be very amusing."

I chew my lip, turning it over. Is it crazy to even consider it? Bringing a literal demon as my plus-one? Then again... the thought of Vivian's face when she sees me with this unearthly gorgeous man on my arm...

Because there's no way around it. Levi is very handsome. Both in his human and his demonic form.

I'm trying to ignore the fact I find his monstrous form sexier than the human one.

"Okay," I say. "Okay. We should establish ground rules."

"Rules? For pretending to be your boyfriend?" He gulps his latte. I still can't believe he's a fan of pumpkin spice lattes.

"Of course. No funny business. No hurting anyone..."

"You still think I'm some animal."

"...No kissing or touching."

Levi arches an eyebrow. “No kissing or touching? How do you expect them to believe it? People kissed in 90 Days Fiancé.”

“Because they’re in real relationships.” I take a beat. No touching might be too much. He’s right about that. “Okay. No overt touching. I guess handholding is fine.” He opens his mouth to say something, but I cut him in. “And no sex, obviously.”

Levi’s face transforms with a smirk. I just know he’s thinking of the icon and how I masturbated with it.

“Anything else?” he teases, his voice slightly lowered.

It sends warmth straight to my core. “No. Do you have something you’d like to add?”

Levi hums, his hooded eyes still on me. “No falling in love. I’ll have to return to Hell and I’d hate to break your heart.”

I laugh. “That’s easy.” I offer a hand. “So, we’re fake dating until the wedding. Deal?”

Levi takes my hand in his. He’s so big his fingers encapsulate mine. Warmth seeps into my very bones. He has a smile when our eyes meet. “Deal.”

CHAPTER 10

LEVIATHAN

The cool morning air nips at my face as I pluck a shiny red apple from a branch. Sunlight dapples through the leaves. Apple trees stretch out in all directions, rustling to the breeze. It's so damn peaceful it catches my breath.

That. Or the woman next to me.

Cordelia stands beside me, her wavy blonde hair cascading over her shoulders, freckled cheeks flushed from the chill. She stretches for an apple, the fabric of her cozy sweater clinging to her curves in all the right places. Effortlessly alluring.

I don't know how she managed to summon me. Me, of all demons. But I'm glad she did. She glances at me, those blue eyes sparkling. I find myself quite lost for words anytime she looks at me like this.

I clear my throat and look away. "Still can't believe humans pay to do manual labor on someone else's farm," I muse, tossing the apple into the large bag slung over my shoulder.

Cordelia chuckles, the sound like wind chimes. Surely you have some concept of fun in Hell?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Of course. Demons love a party. Personally, I work so much I'd rather just be left in peace here and there."

“You keep saying you’re important and work a lot,” she says as Sylvia chucks an apple into my bag. “What do you do in Hell? Exactly?”

“I told you. Management.”

Cordelia props her hands onto her hips and arches an eyebrow back. “You’re expecting me to believe there’s such a title as manager in Hell?”

I shrug. “Not exactly. The title is King of Demons. King of Hell works, too. It doesn’t change the job description.” And I move ahead to the next section of apples. These have a sign that says “Mackintosh.” “You have some weird names for apples. Does Miranda want some of these?” She had a whole list of types of apples she wanted, though they all look the same to me.

When Cordelia doesn’t answer, I glance over my shoulder at them.

Both stare at me with wide eyes, their jaws hanging. They exchange a glance, say nothing, and then stare back at me.

Sylvia scoffs, then frowns. “You’re shitting me.” Her gaze darts to Cordelia. “Your handwriting is so atrocious, you accidentally summoned Satan?!” Her voice rises in the end.

“Shh!” Cordelia flaps her hands, glancing around in a panic as if the other apple pickers might overhear. Lowering her voice, she fixes me with pleading eyes. “You said your name was Levi! How come you forgot to mention this?”

“I told you I have many names.”

Cordelia stomps toward me, lowering her voice. “Does Satan happen to be one of them?”

“Technically yes and no, at the same time. That’s not how it works.”

Cordelia pinches the bridge of her nose and huffs. “Please. Be specific.”

“I’m King of the Underworld. When I say Hell, it’s not the Christian Hell; it’s just Hell. The Underworld. The place where dead mortals go after their bodies die. I preside over the spirits, that’s all.”

Cordelia frowns. “You’re a demon.”

“Yes.”

“And you expect me to believe you’re not evil?”

“It depends on what your present culture classifies as evil.”

“Oh, I get it!” says Sylvia, rushing closer. “Remember how left-handed people used to be considered evil? And black cats?”

Left-handed people were evil? That’s random. “Yes,” I tell them. “The definition of evil can change depending on the culture.” I shake my head as I turn back toward the Mackintosh apples. “I don’t torture souls out of pleasure if that’s what you’re asking. I’m just the manager. And it’s a lot of work. The more humans exist, the more humans die. And that’s only on this plane. Other planes have other sentient creatures, like Orcs, and they also go into the Underworld. You can imagine the level of bureaucracy I’m left with.”

“But...” Cordelia comes after me. “You look like a demon. And you said some demons make deals.”

“Any creature with an inkling of magic will make deals. Nothing is born evil,

Cordelia. There are evil demons, of course, as much as there are evil humans and orcs and whatnot. King of the Underworld doesn't mean King of Evil."

Cordelia lowers her eyes. She seems taken by her thoughts for a few minutes. Sylvia tags along, glancing up at me.

"So, what does the King of Hell do, if not make deals and collect souls?" Sylvia asks.

I shrug nonchalantly. "Mostly bureaucratic nonsense. Keeping track of the dead, making sure everyone's where they belong. The numbers are astronomically large, so it takes a while, even with helpers."

Sylvia snorts. "A devilish spreadsheet enthusiast. Maybe Lia can give you some data engineering tips."

Cordelia flushes deeper, snapping her gaze up at me. "I doubt the King of the Underworld needs help to optimize his database."

"What do you do besides summoning demons?" I ask her.

She elbows me and I sidestep with a half-smile. "I'm a data engineer. I wrangle information and build systems to make sense of it all."

"Sounds thrilling," I deadpan, holding open the sack for Sylvia to dump in another armful of apples.

"Oh, like being Hell's Manager is a barrel of laughs?" Cordelia retorts.

I grin. "Fuck no. Our jobs are both boring as shit. I'm sorry."

Cordelia chuckles and the sound goes straight to my chest. She's got gentle charms

and hidden depths, equal parts sexy and adorable, whip-smart and endearingly awkward. And I'm painfully aware of having to be very careful around her.

There's something about Cordelia. Something that draws me in, bespells me. And it'll make it extra hard to leave.

CHAPTER 11

CORDELIA

The farmer's market is one of my favorite places to visit in the fall. The scents of apple cider and cinnamon swirl around us, making my stomach rumble. My mouth waters as we pass a tent selling all sorts of jam.

Towering over me, Levi's dark presence draws curious glances, but his eyes remain fixed ahead, scanning the rows of pumpkins and gourds. I hug my cardigan tighter; the weather is cooler than I expected today.

"Maybe we should have brought a cart. The pumpkins we passed are huge," I say.
"We can't carry four of them."

A wicked glint sparks in his obsidian eyes. "I could carry a pumpkin in each hand if I shifted forms."

"No!" The word bursts out, too loud. Heat floods my cheeks as heads turn our way. I glare at him. "Absolutely not. I can't imagine the chaos that would bring."

His chuckle rumbles low, sending a shiver down my spine that has nothing to do with the cold. "Ashamed to be seen with me, Pumpkin?"

"What? No, I just..." My tongue trips over itself. My face goes hot, thinking he's mocking me, but his face is serious. "I'm not used to people looking at me. And everyone's looking at you, so that makes them look at me, too. The demon form

would only make matters worse." Shadow Glen loves Halloween now, but not this much.

Strong fingers curl around my waist, pulling me into the solid wall of his chest. I stumble into Levi. I peek up at him through my lashes, my pulse stuttering at our proximity. "What are you doing?"

"Let them stare," he growls, his voice way too sexy. "We're supposed to be pretending, remember?"

Levi's heat sears through my thin sweater, and I'm abruptly aware of every place our bodies touch. It's too much, too fast.

Levi must feel it. He asks, "Tell me. Why aren't you used to have people looking at you?"

I swallow hard. "I've always been... lonely. Kind of awkward. My mom wasn't a good mom. Everything I did was wrong somehow. I was never enough. Sylvia was my only real friend. And after my mom died, Miranda... She took me in and gave me a home again. But it still feels that I never quite healed of the way my mom treated me. Then there's Marcus and Vivian. They always make me feel like I don't fit. Like I'm still doing something wrong."

His midnight gaze softens. "What happened to your parents?"

There's a strange sort of safety here, cocooned against his chest, like the rest of the world has fallen away. I find myself wanting to tell him things. "Dad left when I was a kid. He wasn't interested in being a dad, I guess." I shrug. That wound had healed years ago. Unfortunately, I wasn't the only kid with a deadbeat father. "Mom was in a car accident. I was at a sleepover with Syl when we got the call."

Levi is quiet for a long moment. Then, so gentle I almost miss it, "I understand complicated family shit. Mine always expected me to obey. As if I had asked to be born. They always expected me to do everything they desired out of gratitude for giving me life. They pushed me into a job I never wanted." He shrugs, a king's heavy mantle weighing his broad shoulders.

I meet his eyes, and the understanding that passes between us is so raw, so real it aches. We're more alike than I ever imagined, two lonely hearts stumbling through the dark. Maybe that's why this pretending feels dangerously close to something else.

Abruptly, Levi lets go. "How about this one, Pumpkin?"

He hefts a massive pumpkin with one hand as if it weighs nothing, his biceps flexing beneath his black Henley. My mouth goes dry. Seriously, how is he even real?

"Um, y-yeah," I stammer. "That's perfect."

He quirks a brow, lips twitching. "Something wrong?"

"Nope." I spin toward the next tent, cheeks blazing. "Not a thing."

As Levi falls into step beside me, pumpkin tucked casually under his arm, I struggle to slow my thundering heart. I can't be attracted to him. He's literally a demon, the devil himself. This is all just pretend.

Right?

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CHAPTER 12

LEVIATHAN

I lean close to Cordelia's ear as we enter the bustling cafe, the heady aroma of coffee and bread enveloping us. "Can you believe that scene with Angela? I swear her crying was faker than those eyelashes."

Cordelia giggles, her bright blue eyes sparkling. "I know, right? Total crocodile tears. But I thought you were watching 90 Days to study the human experience or something?"

I shrug. "There's a line and she crossed it two episodes ago."

Cordelia chuckles and approaches the counter with a soft smile. "Two pumpkin spice lattes, please."

Cordelia's gaze flickers to the golden pastries on display before she pulls back, biting her plump lower lip. I raise a brow. She wants one. So why not get it?

As the human punches in our order, I tilt my head at the glowing screen. "Is that contraption how you pay for things here?"

Cordelia nods. "Yeah, it's a card reader and I have one installed into my phone."

I blink slowly. "Again. Too many new words in the same sentence, Pumpkin."

She grins, her cheeks going pink.

The cashier turns to grab cups and I stop Cordelia from tapping her metal rectangle into the screen. With a flick of my fingers, I send a pulse of magic. The machine beeps, the words Card Accepted blinking on the screen. Easy.

Cordelia grabs my arm, her freckled face scrunched with worry as she pulls me aside. "Levi, is that... okay? I don't want to shortchange the cafe."

That's adorable. A grin tugs at my lips. "Don't fret, they'll get their money." I wink. "Demon's honor. Now. Explain to me." I point at the metal rectangle still in her hand. "What's that?"

As we wait for our drinks, Cordelia explains that cash has become electronic and you can pay for things with plastic cards. She tells me about phones and the internet and I try to keep up.

A girl in a puffy vest pauses next to us, pressing her back to the wall under one of the shelves. She poses with her cup, furiously tapping at her phone. I nudge Cordelia. "What's that about?"

She leans in conspiratorially. "She's taking a picture. A photograph. We have, like, online communities where we share them. Pumpkin spice latte is like, the official drink of fall."

Still pretty hard to follow half of what she says, but I understand it takes time. The girl takes a sip, pulls a face, then tosses the nearly full cup in the trash.

I gasp . I don't even remember the last time I gasped. "What the fuck? She threw it away? After paying for it?" I stare at Cordelia. "Poisoned?"

Cordelia chuckles. "Not poisoned. Some people become famous for their pictures, but that doesn't mean they're true." Cordelia shrugs as she grabs our lattes.

I take my cup from her and follow her outside. "For a moment, I thought I was getting used to your world. Now you lost me. Why buy a drink just for a picture?"

"Image is everything these days." Cordelia sighs, sipping her latte. "A lot of fitness gurus would never actually drink these. Too many calories." She pats her curvy hip. "It'd ruin their figure."

I laugh. "I don't know what a fitness guru is, but I don't understand how calories could ruin their figure. Soft and curvy is the standard of beauty." Plush thighs, pillowy breasts, round hips. Utterly luscious. Like Cordelia.

Cordelia smiles wistfully. "That was the standard, like three hundred years ago."

My gaze drifts to her empty hands. "Wait. Is that why you were eyeing those pastries and didn't buy them? Because you're afraid of calories?"

Pink blooms across her freckled cheeks. "Oh, um, I'm avoiding carbs. They make you gain weight and I'm already?—"

"Perfect." I cut her off firmly. Horror claws up my throat at the defeated slump of her shoulders. No. I will not have my lush little human disparaging her delectable form. "You look perfect, Cordelia. You can't tell me you're not eating because you're afraid of gaining weight. What's the beauty standard? Starved?"

Her face goes even redder. "Pretty much, yeah," she whispers, looking away.

I study her face as we walk down the street. She doesn't like the subject. It's probably something that's been in her head for a while, eating at her self-worth. She doesn't

deserve this. She also doesn't need my prying.

Wrapping my fingers around hers, I guide across the street and toward a second cafe. The one we first visited.

"Where are we going?" she asks, her small fingers intertwining with mine.

"We're getting something to eat."

"Levi, wait, you don't have to?—"

"I want to." I squeeze her fingers into mine. "Let me take care of you."

Her breathing hitches and she ducks her head, but not before I catch the pleasure that lights up her sky-blue eyes. That's more like it. I try to smother the pride inside my chest, but it's impossible.

Once we reach the cafe, I find myself in a dilemma. With the left hand, I hold Cordelia. With the right, my drink. How am I supposed to open the door? See? That's why we have four arms...

"Shit," Cordelia hisses, looking over her shoulder.

I turn with her. Marcus and Vivian cross the street toward us. Both look down into their phones so they haven't seen us yet.

Shit indeed. Cordelia tenses, her pulse fluttering wildly against my skin. She shrinks into my side. Voice barely a whisper. "I really don't want to deal with them right now."

I squeeze her hand in silent support, sidestepping from the door. "How badly do you

want to avoid them?"

"A lot." Her reply is immediate, bordering on desperate.

Well then. I glance around, a plan taking shape. We can't run. They'd obviously see us. We need an excuse. We need to look so busy they don't try to talk to us.

I tug her flush against my chest. Meeting her eyes, I say, "Please, don't knee me in the balls."

"What?"

Bending, I kiss her in the mouth. It's just a press of lips, but she's warm and soft and she tastes like spice and sugar. My eyelids flutter closed. The taste of her shoots straight to my cock. I let go of her hand in favor of burying my fingers into her soft, soft hair.

I'm lost in the kiss for so long I forget what we're supposed to do. And when we break apart, Cordelia's eyes are so wide, I know she feels it, too.

And I know I'm screwed.

CHAPTER 13

LEVIATHAN

It's insane how many times every day I wish I had my two other arms. They make everything so much easier and it would have been so much faster to finish this.

I stab the pumpkin, but the knife sinks all the way to the hilt. Again.

Cordelia snorts. "You put too much strength into it. I can't believe you haven't sliced it open yet."

"These pumpkins are too fragile," I shoot back at her.

Sylvia laughs. "No, they're definitely not." She huffs as she seesaws with a tiny knife.

I arch an eyebrow at her. "You need help? Why are you using a toothpick?"

"It's not a toothpick," she says, out of breath. "It's for the details."

"You're just copying me," I tell her, looking at my fairly good skeleton face. For my first pumpkin, and for someone who's using two arms instead of four, it's not bad at all.

Sylvia gasps, turning her pumpkin toward me. "Mine is Jack Skellington, you uncultured brute."

Cordelia sucks air in through her teeth, glancing at Sylvia. "You're aware he could pop your head open like that pumpkin, right?" Cordelia asks her friend.

Sylvia doesn't reply. She's too far gone into her pumpkin carving, her frown so deep I don't think she can unmake it. Miranda laughs.

"Levi wouldn't do that," she says, smiling at me. "He's a guest until the wedding." She shoots an amused glance at Cordelia. "And your boyfriend, as Vivian mentioned."

Cordelia yelps. Her knife drops. She hisses in pain, crimson blood welling up from a cut in her palm.

"Lia, are you okay?" Sylvia's voice rises with concern. She shoots her mother a glare. "Mom, we don't bring Vivian up in this house. It's clearly bad luck."

"I'm so sorry, dear," says Miranda, pushing back from the table. "Let me help you with that."

Cordelia shakes her head, cradling her hand. "I'm fine. Don't get up." She stands, heading for the kitchen.

I follow her, an invisible tug pulling me along. My heart beats strangely fast. I hated the sight of blood in her hand. I hated the way her brows furrowed with pain.

In the kitchen, Cordelia runs the water, pink swirling down the drain. Her shirt is stained with her pumpkin's guts, sticking to her stomach and her perfect tits.

Am I obsessed with her tits? Absolutely.

Do I care about them right now? Not even closer.

I step closer."Let me see." I reach for her hand. She hesitates, blue eyes searching mine. "I won't hurt you, Cordelia. I promise."

Slowly, she extends her hand. I'm surprised by the rush of protectiveness that floods through me as I examine the cut. It's not deep, but still bleeding.

I bring her palm to my lips. Her breath hitches as my tongue glides over the wound, tasting copper. I lick again. Under my ministrations, the bleeding slows, then stops completely. Magic tingles on my tongue.

Cordelia's cheeks flush pink, pupils dilating.

Shit. Now that the cut's closed and I can't smell her blood anymore, things change. The sight of desire on her face ignites something inside me. The air thickens with tension, need coiling tight in my core.

My cock twitches. Fuck, it's been a while.

"That's...you shouldn't..." Cordelia mumbles, swallows, then licks her plump lips.

"Probably not," I murmur, my voice rough with want. But I can't bring myself to regret it, not with her pulse fluttering wildly beneath my fingertips. Not with the way she looks at me, equal parts scandalized and aroused.

What would happen if I kissed her again? Would she kick me? Would she scream? Sylvia and Miranda are right there in the other room. They'd come running and I don't want to ruin this little thing we have going on.

But if I kissed her and if she let me... Would Cordelia get wet for me? Would she moan when I pinched her nipples? Fuck, to hear the way she'd sigh my name as I licked her pretty cunt...

I wrestle control back. Deep breath. Another. I release her hand reluctantly. Already, I crave more—more of her taste, her scent, her warmth.

"Thanks," she says, her voice rasping. "That was amazing."

"Magic can be useful."

We stare at one another. I have no idea what's going on inside her head. Does she think I'm disgusting? Is she disgusted by a monster who's attracted to her?

"I'm glad you fumbled the spell," I admit, holding her gaze. Let her see the honesty in my eyes, the desire. "I'm in no rush to return. Not after meeting you."

Uncertainty clouds her expression. She frowns. "You don't have to pretend when we're alone."

We stare at each other, the silence electric. Her tongue darts out to wet her lips and I barely suppress a groan. She has no idea what she's doing to me.

Finally, Cordelia clears her throat. "We should go back."

Disappointment is a lump in my throat. I struggle not to show it on my face. "Of course."

She takes the lead back into the living room. I linger, watching her go. Not because of her delicious ass, though that's a bonus.

But because... Shit... My heart races when I'm with her. I'm enjoying this far too much. I like talking to her and I like watching movies and hearing her point of view on them. Cordelia is stunning and funny and smart and...

Shit. This can't be. No way.

There's no way I'm falling in love with her.

CHAPTER 14

CORDELIA

Vibrant oranges, reds, and golds paint the park as Levi and I stroll along the leaf-strewn path. The crisp air nips at my nose and I snuggle deeper into my scarf.

I sideglance at Levi. "There's no way you're not cold," I hiss to the inside of my scarf. He's upgraded from the seven-eighths-sleeve Henley to a button-down dark blue shirt that he rolled to his elbows. It's sinfully hot. Even his forearms are sexy.

Worse. He was even sexier at home, in his true form. I never knew I was into the monster thing, but the dark blue of the shirt goes so well with the red of his skin. Also, there's something about massive, muscular guys wearing button-downs; I don't know why.

"It's pretty comfortable, if you ask me," he says, grinning. "Hell's always warm."

"Because of all the hellfire?"

He scoffs. "No. Because it's the most comfortable for newcomers. You're already traumatized by death. You don't need to be shocked by ice cold or scalding hot." He takes a beat, his boots crunching the fallen leaves. "Since I run hot, I prefer this weather right here."

A squirrel rushes down a tree toward us. I slow down as it approaches.

"Hi, Mr. Squirrel!" I say, smiling as I search for the peanuts I brought, especially for this situation. "Here, I brought you a snack."

"You feed any animal you find in the street?" Levi asks, stopping next to me. "I didn't see you feeding that raccoon we passed yesterday."

"It's not the same," I say, knowing very well I'm lying. I glance up at Levi, his shaggy black hair tousled by the breeze. "Raccoons eat trash. They might have diseases."

Levi smirks, obsidian eyes glinting. "Pretty sure any rodent might."

"Your point?" I kneel and offer the squirrel a peanut, but the animal doesn't move, staring wide-eyed at Levi.

"Squirrels are rodents, Pumpkin."

That nickname again. It makes my heart skip. I can't help but giggle. "Leave me be," I hiss, grinning like an idiot. "The squirrel is afraid of you. Can you take a step back?"

The breeze changes and the rich aroma of apples and cinnamon wafts over us. I lift my eyes to find a cider stand a few paces from us. Levi's brow furrows.

"What's that delightful scent?" Levi asks.

"Apple cider. It's amazing."

Levi ambles over to the stand, glancing over his shoulder at me. "I'll grab us some," he says, "while you feed your definitely-not-a-rodent."

Chuckling, I offer the squirrel the peanut again. This time, the squirrel accepts my offer. Fallen leaves crunch behind me and I glance up.

With a jolt, I recognize Marcus striding towards me, his designer coat flapping. His brown hair is pushed back from his face and he's dressed in a white overcoat with white trousers. And he's already seen me. Great. No time to make a stealthy escape and no Levi to kiss me again. I get to my feet.

"Lia." Marcus halts in front of me, jaw tight. "What's up? We couldn't catch up that day."

"Yeah. Everything's great." I force a smile onto my face. "Ready to get married?"

He shoves a hand through his hair but it barely moves. "Of course, of course. It's about time. We're not getting any younger." He frowns at me. "Look. I know there's a lot of pressure to get married. Truly, I do. But I need to talk to you about your new... friend." He glances over my shoulder toward the apple cider stand.

I straighten, crossing my arms. "Levi is not my friend. He's my boyfriend." My heartbeat picks up. Did he find something out? Did he overhear us?

"He's an asshole. Can't you see he's just using you?" Marcus's green eyes flash with indignation. "Come on, Lia. You've always been smart, but too innocent. Too trusting."

"Not anymore," I say, cutting him in. Heat rises in my cheeks. "And you don't know the first thing about Levi or our relationship."

"Come on, Lia, open your eyes! That guy is bad news. The way he treated Vivian? That was so uncalled for. Rude. You know that."

"Vivian was being rude first," I tell him. "Look, I know we have history, but we're both over it. She should get over it, too." My chest burns, emboldened. I feel bigger, for some reason. More powerful.

Steps crunch the leaves behind me, heavy, ominous. Marcus looks up and up, his face going serious.

"Is there a problem here?" Levi appears at my side, two steaming cups in hand. His eyes narrow at Marcus as he steps closer, towering over him.

Marcus scoffs. "Just looking out for Cordelia. Someone has to."

Levi's voice drops to a menacing rumble. "I suggest you worry about yourself. If I catch you harassing her again..." He lets the unspoken threat hang in the air.

Despite myself, a shiver of excitement runs down my spine. There's something thrilling about Levi's protectiveness, misguided as it may be. And it feels so good to know I have him on my side.

Marcus backs away, hands raised. "Whatever. Your funeral." He stalks off, leaving us alone.

Levi turns to me, brow creased. "What was that about?"

I sigh, accepting the warm cider from him. The steam curls around us. "What you heard. He thinks you're bad news because you were rude to Vivian."

"Who was rude to you first," Levi adds, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I told him that." I blow at the cider. "This is so stupid. Marcus and I dated back in high school. But it was never serious. And it was forever ago."

"He seems awfully possessive for an ex." Levi takes a sip, eyes widening at the taste before he continues. "Surprised you went for an asshole like that. I guess you didn't have many options in such a small town."

I chuckle as we return to our walk. "Honestly? I've never really been in love. The bar really is pretty low." I shrug, kicking at a pinecone.

Levi is quiet for a moment. "I get that. Hard to believe in love when your own family can't be bothered to show it." He sips the cider. "You'd expect that, if love exists, your family would have it toward you, right?"

My heart clenches. He understands. More than anyone else ever has. "Right," I whisper. "I feel exactly the same."

We walk in companionable silence until the path opens into a small clearing. There's no one around. All the tourists are back in the main part of the park. The golden trees arch overhead, framing the blue sky. When I sip from the cider and breathe out, air condenses in front of me.

Levi stops, turning to face me. His gaze roams over my features with an intensity that steals my breath.

"What?" My voice comes out softer than I intend.

I blink and Levi has changed. He has four arms and his red skin is beautiful with the dark blue shirt and his eyes are on me. With one hand, he holds the cup away. With the second, he grabs my hips and pulls me into his chest. The other two cup my face so gently that my breath hitches.

Levi leans down and captures my lips with his. The kiss is tentative at first—a gentle brush of skin on skin. Then he parts his lips and the world falls away. I melt into him, fingers clutching the front of his shirt.

He tastes like apples, oranges, and cinnamon. My eyelids flutter shut as I put my weight into him. His fingers tangle with my hair. My heart beats in my ears as I sigh

into his mouth.

Levi dips his tongue into my mouth. I do the same with him, experimenting. Then he takes over, devouring my lips, sucking on my tongue, and eating up every little whimper I make.

It's nothing like any other kiss I've ever received. He's nothing like any other man I've ever met. My knees tremble as I gasp for air, but Levi doesn't let me go. He's too hungry for me. And I'm starved for him in equal measure.

It's not our first kiss, but somehow, in this moment, it feels like it is. It feels real .

CHAPTER 15

LEVIATHAN

I chop the vegetables with lightning speed, my four arms a blur of motion. Each hand wields a knife with precision, dicing onions, mincing garlic, and slicing peppers into perfect strips. The scent of sauteing spices fills the kitchen.

Fuck, it's so good to use my four hands for a change. I pity poor humans with their two arms. There's so much one can accomplish with four.

The hot oil hisses when I add onion to the pan. I move the vegetable around until it gets transparent, as mentioned in the recipe.

Turns out cooking is great to get your mind off things. I cooked only a handful of times in my life, so every part of the process is a challenge. It gets worse because it's human food and I don't even know how it's supposed to taste or look. But it helps with keeping dangerous thoughts away.

Mostly.

Maybe keeping some distance by staying in my devil form will tamp down this growing infatuation.

I sigh. No. Infatuation is not the right word. I know the right word, but I refuse to use it. These feelings have burrowed inside me, spreading roots, and it terrifies me. I'm immortal darkness; she's mortal sunshine. We could never?—

"Sorry to inform, but Miranda said she's still looking for a way to unbind us."

I glance up to find Cordelia leaning against the counter. And here I've been trying to hide from her.

"She can take her time," I reply, focusing on my task.

Cordelia approaches. "That smells amazing." She leans on the counter, wonder sparkling in her cerulean eyes as she takes in my extra appendages. "You're like a culinary octopus."

A surprised chuckle escapes me. Her delighted smile sends warmth blooming in my chest. I clear my throat.

"Just trying out some things. I finished 90 Days and moved to this baking competition show."

"Oh, I saw it on the TV's home screen. I used to watch that with my ex when it first came out. The one with the celebrity chefs?"

My grip tightens on the knife. Jealousy sears me. I'm being ridiculous—of course she's had other relationships. Even if she said she's never been in love, she had other men touch her. Kiss her.

Meanwhile, I've not had any action in centuries. And never with a human. Fuck. I hadn't thought from this angle. Even if we ever did something more than kissing, there's a good chance I won't know what to do. She's so different from me.

She's so much smaller. Could she even fit me?

Fuck. No. No no no. I shouldn't have thought that. My cock twitches to life and I

have to hide my hips behind the counter.

I roughly slide the vegetables into the pan, oil sizzling. After popping the shepherd's pie in the oven (strange name: it doesn't look like a pie), I vigorously scrub the counters, avoiding her gaze.

Cordelia's brow furrows. "Did I upset you?"

"No," I bark back, too fast.

"Then why did you sound upset when I mentioned my ex?" She takes a beat. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were slut-shaming me." An edge of hurt laces her tone.

I freeze, dishcloth in hand. "Slut-shaming?" I meet her eyes.

"Yes. Shaming me for having slept with someone."

I lower my gaze. "Your past is your own. I'm not one to judge."

"Then why are you upset?"

I can't answer. I can't tell her I'm mad with jealousy that anyone other than me ever touched her. This is ridiculous. She doesn't belong to me. She belongs to no one. This is so stupid.

And yet, I can't reel my feelings in. They rise in my chest and pour out unbid. I stare at her. "You said you never fell in love, right?"

"Right." She arches an eyebrow. "So?"

My heart races. That's what matters. I've never been in love either. Not until...

Not until her.

"Is this about yesterday's kiss?" she murmurs, stepping closer. "I'll understand if you want to pretend it never happened."

"Pretend?" I shake my head. "Cordelia. I can't pretend that never happened. Fuck, I can't stop thinking about it."

She chews on her bottom lip. "Levi." Her hand touches my arm and I stop. It all stops. There's only the two of us in the entire world. "It's my fault. I know it. That we're stuck together. That you're far from home. And you went ahead and accepted my fake dating proposal. But if you want to stop... I know we're not real and..."

Something in me snaps. I'm in front of her in one stride. Pulling her flush against me, I capture her lips in a searing kiss. She gasps and I deepen the kiss, tasting her sweetness, breathing her in. My arms wrap around her soft curves as I pour my pent-up longing into the kiss.

She tastes fucking amazing. Every time our tongues touch, my cock jumps. There's no way I can hide my raging erection now.

After a moment, I tear myself away, both of us panting. Her eyes are wide, cheeks flushed, pink lips kiss-swollen.

Resting my forehead against hers, I rasp, "Don't." I catch my breath, my eyes on her face. "Don't ever say this isn't real."

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CHAPTER 16

CORDELIA

His lips hover inches from mine, the warmth of his body making me lightheaded. Levi towers above me, his four muscular arms caging me in. His dark red skin seems to beckon my touch as his black eyes bore into me, daring me to close the distance.

This is wrong, a voice in the back of my mind whispers. He's a demon. The King of the Underworld.

A monster.

But my body aches for his touch, yearning to lose myself in him. Heart pounding, I tilt my chin up and press my lips to his.

Electricity courses through me at the contact. His mouth slants over mine, the kiss deep and claiming, igniting a fire low in my belly. Strong hands grip my waist as Leviathan lifts me effortlessly onto the kitchen island, his massive body wedging between my thighs.

I don't know what's going on between us. There's a strange feeling growing inside my chest, but I'm afraid to look at it too closely.

Levi touches me, his hand curling around my knee, stroking up my thigh. My pussy clenches, heat curling between my hips.

This is not about feelings. I don't have to think about them. We can be fake and have fun at the same time, right?

I reach out, my hands splayed on his chest. He's so muscular. His pecs move slightly under my hands. I roam my fingertips down his stomach, feeling him up through the shirt, then back up to his shoulders. I grab onto the higher pair of biceps, keeping me grounded as he fucks my mouth with his tongue.

Levi groans against me. His body is tense, stiff. As if he's holding back.

"Touch me," I plead against his mouth without opening my eyes. My heart races and I might pass out from lust if I look into his eyes right now.

Levi snaps. Without breaking the kiss, two of his hands curl around my waist. They're so big he envelops me, even when I'm a big girl myself. The tips of his thumb brush underneath my breasts and wetness grows hot between my legs.

He holds me up effortlessly and his two other hands make quick work of my pants, tugging them down my legs. I moan into his mouth, my core throbbing with need, dripping with arousal. The hard planes of his chest press against my sensitive breasts as a third hand ventures between my thighs.

His fingertips brush the inside of my leg. I hiss against his mouth, spreading myself to him. Is this alright? Is this going too fast?

Levi buries a hand into my hair, pulling my head back, exposing my throat. He kisses my cheek, my jaw, then bites down onto the sensitive skin of my neck until I moan.

"You make the prettiest sounds," he murmurs against the wet skin, making me shiver. "Keep them coming for me."

I only had sex back in school, when I had to be discreet and quiet. It's so strange to be asked to be loud.

And it's not hard at all.

Levi brushes his fingers over my panties, finding the slit of my pussy easily. He growls into the hollow of my throat, all animalistic need. I get lost in his hands—one is in my hair, the other between my thighs, a third holds my leg open, and the fourth ventures up to grab my breast. He's hot all over. My body goes extra sensitive, pulsing and buzzing with energy.

And we barely even started.

Once more, he lifts me off the island, tugging my panties down. The marble is cool against my skin. In the back of my head, I tell myself we shouldn't be doing this on the kitchen counter. We shouldn't be doing this somewhere my best friend could catch me.

It doesn't last long. My mind is hazy with hot need. I half-open my eyes to find Levi staring at my pussy. I don't have the time to feel insecure before he growls again, his black eyes huge.

"Fuck, you're perfect." He kisses me again and this time, his fingers find my swollen clit.

My toes curl. I throw my head back, inviting him to nibble on my neck again. He does it, sucking and licking. He twists my nipples through the shirt. A thick finger pushes gently into my entrance to gather my arousal, then works circles around my clit.

It's embarrassing how fast I approach an orgasm.

"Levi," I gasp, head falling back as pleasure spirals through me. "Oh. Oh. "

"Fucking hell," he groans, more to himself than to me.

He shoves his own pants down, freeing his large, throbbing erection. I only see it for a second before he takes it in his hand. He keeps working on me, faster and faster, his lips devouring my sounds. My hips move in time with his ministrations. I climb toward an orgasm.

I'm right on the edge, trembling, shaking with need, begging breathlessly. Levi's hand flies up and down his cock, right against my thigh. His member is even hotter than the rest of his body. I want to touch it, but I'm too far gone.

"That's it, gorgeous," Leviathan rasps. "Come for me."

His command sends me flying apart with a cry, my orgasm crashing over me in intense waves. I explode like never before. Pleasure is an electric current running down my limbs and straight into my heart. I scream and convulse between his hands. Leviathan growls, his own release following swiftly.

Ropes of his warm come spurt onto my thighs, then onto my shirt. It keeps coming even harder, spurting everywhere . It hits my face at one point as he continues to pump his cock, riding out his high with deep grunts.

We stay there for a moment, chests heaving, basking in the afterglow. I half-open my eyes to look at him.

His cock is huge . It's a darker red than the rest of his body, with big veins running down the sides. He's also... kind of textured? There are bumps all along the shaft, big grooves giving it a spiraling horn look. The head is tapered and there's a... a...

He has a knot. I can't think about that right now.

Leviathan meets my eyes, his lips parted with shallow breath. He raises a hand and gently wipes his come from my chin with his thumb, an apology falling from his lips. But the sheepish gesture cracks through the tension and suddenly we're both laughing, loud and carefree, the sound echoing through the kitchen.

And in that moment, I want to pretend this is all real.

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CHAPTER 17

CORDELIA

The front door snaps shut, jolting me awake. Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I sit up as Levi strides into the bedroom. He's in a white t-shirt that sets off the red of his skin and gray sweatpants. I do a double take. Am I dreaming?

He scoffs. "You alright?"

I don't know what face I did, but I try to school my expression. "Sure. Just... Um. Nothing." I smile. "Morning."

"Morning indeed." Two of his hands prop onto his hips, the other two raising a cup holder and a paper bag. "Sylvia and Miranda left for work, so I went after food."

My breath catches. He's in full demon form—onyx horns curling above his dark mane, rippling biceps, four arms.

"Did you... leave like that?" I ask, arching an eyebrow. My window is open an inch. Pretty sure I'd be hearing screams and sirens if he had left like this, right?

Levi rolls his eyes as he sits on my mattress. It dips under his weight. "Of course not. You should start trusting me, Lia. I may be King of the Underworld, but I don't enjoy chaos. I get it. Humans are hard to please and they hate what they're afraid of." With a third hand, he plucks one paper cup from the cup holder and offers it to me. "Eat."

I scoot to one edge of the bed and tap the mattress so he sits next to me. He's a little too big for the two of us to share it comfortably, but it works. He puts the paper bag between us and we drink pumpkin spice lattes and eat croissants in silence.

He frowns at the croissant. "This is amazing," he says, his mouth full. "I could eat a hundred of them in one sitting."

"Same." I smile. "But they have a lot of butter. It's not exactly healthy."

He arches an eyebrow. "Let me guess. Too many calories."

"That, and it's not safe for your heart."

"Oh. That part is fine." He finishes his first croissant and moves to the second.

"I thought we were bound." I tell him, slurping the last drops of latte.

He sideglances at me, his eyes strangely guarded. "So?"

"I thought you couldn't leave the house without me or something."

"Oh." He finishes the second croissant, then snaps his fingers. The crumbs that had covered his lap a second ago disappear. "No, it's not that bad. It's... um, plane-wise. If that makes sense."

After I'm done, I rush into the bathroom to get my business done, then back to the bedroom. I enjoy having this intimacy with him. It's completely new to me.

But when I walk in, Levi's holding up my Kindle.

Shit. Shit, shit, I left it under my pillow last night. Panic seizes me. I lunge for the e-

reader but he dangles it just out of reach, eyes dancing with mirth.

His eyes sparkle with sudden interest. "Oh, someone doesn't want me to see this."

"Levi, give it!"

Our tussle accidentally flicks on the screen. He holds me away easily—he has four arms, after all, and every one of them is stronger than me. I plead and threaten, but he ignores me as he holds the Kindle aside and reads.

His expression shifts—playful amusement replaced by a sexy intensity that sends butterflies rioting in my stomach. I stop struggling. Warmth rushes into my face.

Levi slowly turn to look at me. "Is this what you like to read, Lia?" His voice is a sultry caress.

"It's... um, nothing much." But my flustered reaction gives me away.

With a devilish grin, Levi begins reciting aloud, his deep baritone sending shivers down my spine. " She pressed her aching core against his rigid length, grinding shamelessly until rapture overtook her... "

"A girl has needs," I retort, unable to meet his penetrating stare.

God, this is so embarrassing. Reading smut is common and I tell myself I shouldn't be embarrassed. But to hear his deep voice reading it out loud like that? My core does begin to ache.

Levi moves. Fast .

He tosses the Kindle and two of his hands haul me against his hard body. I stumble

into his chest, straddling his hips with a gasp. He takes my distraction to capture my mouth in a searing kiss. His tongue delves deep, tasting, exploring, igniting an inferno inside me.

Lava runs through my veins. I sit down on his already-hard erection, his hands on my hips, on my hair. I kiss him back, sucking on his tongue, our teeth clinking.

Like yesterday, Levi lifts me off with two hands, plucking my pants and panties down my legs. He groans at the sight of my wet pussy, then pushes his sweatpants down. Levipulls me astride him, the impressive evidence of his arousal pressed against my center. His cock is so hot between my legs. I can't stop looking at it.

"Show me." It's a growled command that makes my blood sing. "Show me how they did in the book."

The way Levi looks at me makes me feel like a goddess. There's pure awe in his black eyes when I begin to move. It's as amazing as I expected, all bumpy and silky. My wetness quickly covers his shaft, making the glide easier. I grind my clit against him, my eyelids fluttering shut with pleasure.

Emboldened, I reach between us and wrap my fingers around his thick shaft, marveling at the heat against my palm. Levi groans, his head falling back as I stroke him from root to tip. I circle my hips, gliding my slickness along his length. The delicious friction has me gasping.

"That's it, gorgeous. Take your pleasure." His gravelly praise spurs me on. I rock faster, grinding my throbbing clit against him, chasing the mounting tension coiling tighter and tighter. Levi tugs his shirt up and out of the way, exposing his abs. I spread my hand over his stomach, keeping my balance as I keep moving.

Levi's hands grip my waist, his onyx eyes scorching me with unrestrained lust.

Desperate for more, I squeeze the swollen head of his cock, shuddering as my orgasm crashes over me in blinding waves. I moan out loud, my throat rasping. Levi snarls, his claws sinking into my soft hips, as his own release overtakes him.

He comes hard, the thick liquid spilling hot and copious over my fingers, onto his stomach. Levi reaches out to cover the head so the come doesn't hit his face. It pours down his sides into my sheets.

The scent of it is somehow... good. I glance down, shivering with aftershocks. His come is almost... iridescent. I guess it's magic.

As the tremors recede, he drags me down for another knee-buckling kiss. His come sticks to the inside of my legs and I don't care. I rush my hands into his hair, fingertips brushing his horns, and I kiss him as hard as he kisses me.

Levi sighs against my lips. "You'll be the death of me, little human."

CHAPTER 18

LEVIATHAN

The sky is gray, but Cordelia wanted to take a walk, so that's what we're doing. At this point, I'm pretty sure I'd do anything she wanted me to. Westroll down Main Street hand-in-hand, something I never expected I would get to do.

Unlike the other days, Cordelia seems relaxed. She has this small smile on her lips. Her cheeks are slightly flushed from the cold. She's put on a little hat she called a beanie, the red color accentuated against the golden of her hair.

We approach the first cafe we visited. The Golden Cup . Every time we pass it, I remember the first time I kissed her.

I never thought I was a romantic, but that's because I hadn't met her.

"So, this place belongs to Marcus's family. They're pretty famous. They have a bunch of stores in other cities." Cordelia wrinkles her nose, gesturing at the sleek, modern exterior that clashes with the town's historic charm. "Coffee wasn't that great compared to Jimmy's. Or I guess Witch's Brew. It's called Witch's Brew now."

I chuckle, shaking my head. "They changed their name to Witch's Brew?" Glancing up, I read the signs above other shops. There's the Enchanted Grimoire, a bookshop, and I know Miranda's store is called Hex & Co. "When you think about it, your town really likes the witchcraft theme."

"Yeah, that's a new thing. When I lived here, it was only Miranda's store. Witch's Brew was called Jimmy's. Miranda said the cities nearby have become paranormal hubs or something."

I arch an eyebrow, then point at the mountain looming over the city. "That makes sense. This mountain pulses with magic. It must have ley lines meeting right underneath."

Cordelia's eyes sparkled with curiosity. She opens her mouth to ask about it when someone calls her name.

"Cordelia? Is that you, dear?"

Cordelia freezes, her smile fading. I glance over to see a silver-haired woman waving enthusiastically at us. She's standing just outside The Golden Cup with her phone in hand, dressed in a weird long-sleeved mustard dress, the neckline kind of tilted. It doesn't seem like the tilted aspect is accidental, though.

Cordelia whirls around to the woman. "Aunt Eliza," Cordelia greets, plastering on a polite smile. "How have you been?"

"I thought you'd only arrive for the wedding!" Eliza trills, beckoning us over. "Vivian said you couldn't join us for brunch today. What a lovely surprise!"

Cordelia's eyes widen as she processes her aunt's words. Before she can respond, Vivian herself emerges from the restaurant, her face contorting into a scowl when she spots us.

"Oh, hi, Lia," Vivian says, folding her arms across her chest. "I thought you'd be busy today."

I can't help but smirk at Vivian's thinly veiled displeasure. "Don't worry, we are," I tell her. "Besides, we don't really like the coffee here."

Vivian's cheeks flush with indignation. A victory in my book.

Eliza clears her throat, eyeing me. "And who might this handsome gentleman be, Cordelia? I don't believe we've had the pleasure."

"Levi. I'm Cordelia's boyfriend." A flame starts in my chest. Pride. Fuck, I'm so in love with this woman.

Eliza's eyes widen. "My, my. A boyfriend? That's new. And aren't you a catch? I must say, Cordelia, he's a bit out of your league." She chuckles. "Just kidding, of course."

Anger flares within me at Eliza's backhanded compliment. How dare she insinuate that Cordelia is somehow unworthy of me? Before I can retort, Cordelia speaks up, her voice tight.

"You know what, Aunt Eliza? I think we'll pass on brunch today. Levi and I have other plans. We'll see you at the wedding." She turns on her heel, striding away from the cafe without a backward glance.

I follow close behind, catching up to her as she pauses beneath a towering oak tree, its leaves a riot of gold and crimson.

"Are you alright?" I ask, reaching out to run my fingers through her hair.

Cordelia sighs, leaning against the tree trunk. "I'm fine. It's just... they've always been like this. Even after Mom died, they never bothered to check in on me or offer any support. It's like I don't exist to them unless they need something. Or if they want to

look like a nice, tight-knit family."

I reach out, brushing my knuckles down her jaw. "I know what it's like to have a family that doesn't care, that's so out of touch with reality they can't see what's right in front of them. You're not alone in this. I've got you."

She looks up at me, her eyes glittering like stars. "I don't even like them, Levi. Is that terrible of me?"

"Not at all," I assure her, pulling her into my arms. "You don't owe them anything, Lia. And from now on, I've got your back. You can stand up for yourself, and I'll be right there beside you every step of the way."

Cordelia melts into my embrace, her head resting against my upper stomach as the autumn breeze swirls around us, sending a flurry of leaves cascading down. I tilt her chin up, capturing her lips in a tender kiss that speaks of comfort.

As we part, Cordelia gazes up at me, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Is it weird that I prefer kissing your demon form?"

The feelings burning inside me stumble their way toward my lips. I bite down on it, keeping it all behind my teeth. Fuck. She likes my demon form best. My real form.

"No," I whisper against her lips. "Not weird at all."

CHAPTER 19

LEVIATHAN

As soon as I close the door behind us, I shift into my demon form. Cordelia's blue eyes widen as she takes me in, a rosy blush coloring her freckled cheeks.

I tilt my head. "Should I change back?" Miranda and Sylvia haven't seen me like this yet, but Cordelia likes this form better and I like that she likes it.

Does that even make sense?

Cordelia smiles and shakes her head. "No," she murmurs, spreading a hand on my stomach. "I do prefer you like this. Never thought I'd prefer monsters, but here we are."

A slow grin spreads across my face. "You drive me crazy. You make me want to kiss you every two words."

She giggles as I cup her face in two hands. I lean closer, my mouth already watering for her taste.

She leans back and away from me. "Syl?" She calls out. "You home?"

We wait. No one replies. It's still too early for them. After I started making dinner as a rule, Miranda decided to keep the store open a couple of hours longer every night. Sylvia usually sneaks out early, but she always ends up in a bar with a girl she met.

Once Cordelia relaxes, I capture her lips in a searing kiss. I've gone too long without kissing her. My body needs it like a drug.

She melts against me, her lush curves molding to the hard planes of my body. I slide my tongue along the seam of her lips and she opens for me with a soft moan. Deepening the kiss, I swallow her whimpers as our tongues tangle and caress.

Breaking away, I easily scoop her up in my arms. Cordelia squeals and laughs breathlessly, looping her arms around my neck. I carry her to the bedroom, never taking my eyes from her flushed face, then kick the door shut behind us.

Setting her on her feet, I trail my hands reverently over her shoulders and down her arms. "You're so beautiful," I rasp. "The most exquisite creature I've ever seen."

Cordelia's breath hitches. She licks her delicious lips. "Are you going to fuck me now?"

Her words shoot straight to my cock. It hardens so fast I go a little dizzy.

"I absolutely am."

I kiss her again, exploring her mouth, sucking on her lips. I tug her beanie and coat out, then her shirt and pants. She stands in her underwear and I get rid of those, too. I strip my pretty human bare, revealing expanses of creamy freckled skin and full breasts tipped with dusky pink nipples. My hands curve around her round hips as I bring her closer to me.

Pulling back, I drink in the sight of her, committing every dip and curve to memory. She is a vision, a sensual goddess in the flesh. My cock throbs, straining against my pants. I have never wanted someone more. The feelings I have for her make desire even starker.

Cordelia shivers and arches into my touch. I guide her back onto the bed and strip her off her panties before making her sit on the edge of the mattress. Then I spread her thighs wide with a gentle push. She looks up at me from under her lashes, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

"Levi?" Her whisper is needy, desperate.

"Shh. Let me take care of you." Kneeling between her legs, I lower my head and run my tongue through her.

Her taste explodes on my tongue. Fuck, I almost come from it alone. A grunt rises in my chest and it takes everything in me not to roar in bliss. She tastes fucking incredible. She tastes magic.

Lia cries out, her hips bucking off the bed. I push her back and pin her down with two hands and take a long, slow lick.

"Fuck, you taste divine," I groan, lapping at her. "Sweet ambrosia."

Cordelia's hands fist in my hair as I devour her, tonguing her slit and flicking her swollen clit. Slick coats my chin, her arousal flooding my senses. I thrust my tongue inside her tight channel, fucking her with it as she writhes and keens.

"Oh, God. Oh, God."

I chuckle at the irony. Closing my lips around her clit, I suck longly. Cordelia snaps her hips against my face, trying to close her legs around my head. I pin them down, too, keeping her spread for me, at my complete mercy.

That's when an idea hits.

Fumbling for the nightstand, I open the bottom drawer. That's where I last saw it. Where is it?

I pick up the fertility icon she used to summon me.

"What are you doing?" she asks, breathless.

"Shh," I blow against her pussy.

Circling the tapered tip of the icon against her, I gather her arousal. Then slowly, so damn slowly, I work the smooth, cool piece past her folds, stretching her open. Cordelia stiffens, gasping.

"Oh God, this is so wrong," she pants, "but it feels incredible... Don't stop!"

Smirking against her pussy, I pump the icon in and out, matching the rhythm with my tongue on her clit. I can feel her thighs start to tremble, her walls clenching around the hard length.

"That's it," I whisper against her. "I knew you'd like it, my m—" Shit. I almost called her mate. She's not my mate.

Yet .

With a throaty moan, Cordelia shatters, coming hard against my mouth. She arches her back, hands reaching out for me.

A hand of hers curls around my horn. My balls squeeze so damn hard I'm pretty sure I'll come in my pants. I work her through the orgasm, focusing on her until she's a boneless, satisfied heap on the bed. Sitting back on my haunches, I lick her release from my lips with a wicked grin.

She looks up at me with hooded eyes. I put aside the icon, savoring Cordelia's dazed, blissful expression.

"Are we done?" she whispers.

"Fuck no." Something tells me I'll never be done with her. Ever.

The first finger slips easily into her dripping pussy and she moans, still sensitive from her last orgasm.

"So gorgeous like this," I rumble, inserting a second finger and scissoring gently to stretch her tight walls. "Wet and open for me."

Cordelia rocks her hips, seeking more. I massage her swollen clit with my thumb as I work a third finger inside, marveling at her slick heat. Oh, she's going to feel perfect around my cock. Her head thrashes on the pillow, blonde hair fanning out in disarray.

"Levi, please..." She grips my biceps with desperate fingers. "I need you."

"I've got you, love." I sit next to her in bed, lowering my face so I capture her mouth in a breathless kiss, pumping steadily now. "Come for me again. Let me feel you."

Cordelia cries out into the kiss as she clenches hard around my fingers, shaking apart in my arms. I groan at the vice grip of her pussy, so hot and tight. She's barely finished before she's tugging me closer, breathy pleas falling from her lips.

"Please, Levi, I need your cock. Fuck me, please fuck me..."

Shit. Shit, I need to have her. I need to claim her right now.

I pull my fingers out of her. She whimpers.

"Shh." I hold her hand and bring it down between her legs. "Keep yourself warmed up for me, will you?"

I shoot to my feet to undress. I could do it with magic, but it's much more fun to watch her pupils blown wide, her lips parted with need as she watches me. Her fingers rub her little clit and fuck, I'd watch that for the rest of my life.

Grabbing her waist, I move her up the bed so there's enough space for us. With two hands, I keep myself propped up over her. With the other two, I spread her knees.

Anticipation rolls through me as I line up my thick length, the broad head nudging against her entrance.

I kiss her softly. "It's going to be a tight fit," I tell her. "Let me know if I'm hurting you, okay?"

She nods, moving her hips against me. Trying to impale herself on my cock.

"Are you needy for me?" I ask, smirking.

She smirks right back. "Put your cock in me or I'll grab the icon again."

"Oh. Feisty." I kiss her once more. I'm addicted to her lips.

Even with how ready she is, Cordelia whimpers as I push forward. Her entrance stretches to take me in, struggling to take my girth. I grit my teeth at her impossibly snug walls, easing in torturously slowly. The head finally pops inside her.

"Oh, God!"

I lick a line along her lips. "No. Not God."

She whimpers in response. I reach a hand between her legs to massage her little clit. Slowly, so damn slowly, I enter her. Inch by perfectly tight inch.

"You're so big," she says in a gasp.

"Fuck, you're tight." I growl. "Relax for me, love. Let me in."

She circles her hips, moans spilling out of her. She takes almost half of me when I decide that's enough. She's too small to force the whole thing into her on the first try.

Cordelia's panting, hands fisted in the sheets. I give her a moment to adjust before drawing back and thrusting deep. We both groan at the mind-blowing friction.

Losing myself in her curvy body, I set a building rhythm, fucking into her with long, powerful strokes. The headboard slams the wall as I take her harder, faster, chasing our pleasure. Cordelia's moans gain pitch, nails raking my chest.

"Oh fuck, oh god, Levi!" Her pussy ripples around my driving cock. "I'm gonna—I am?—"

Her inner walls clench around me, then squeeze the air out of me. Fuck. Fuck, it feels fucking perfect. My mind goes blank. Cordelia comes with a hoarse scream, her muscles clutching me like a silken fist. The unbearable squeeze makes me snarl, thrusts growing erratic. I'm so close, burning pleasure curling tight in my groin.

Pinning her wrists beside her head, I fuck into her wildly, rutting like an animal. Her tits bounce with every thrust, hypnotizing me. I sink further into her, almost down to my knot. Each of her limbs is held down by my four hands. Cordelia takes it so beautifully, urging me on with breathy cries, begging me to fill her up. She comes again, squeezing even tighter this time. Pleasure rides down my spine, blinding pleasure like none I've ever known.

With a roar, I come apart at the seams. Come spurts out of me and into her waiting cunt. There's so much that it spills out with the last of my thrusts. I push it back inside her, shuddering with ecstasy. I watch Cordelia's belly distending slightly from the sheer volume pumped inside. And fucking hell, I want to see her like this every fucking day.

I collapse next to her, both of us gasping for air. When I cup her face, her eyes are hazy with blissed out satisfaction. She smiles, worn out and blissful and perfect.

She is mine. And I am never letting her go.

CHAPTER 20

CORDELIA

"Y ou know, Lia, seeing you with Levi has really inspired me to get back out in the dating pool." Sylvia winks at me as she grabs her purse. "Even if he's a literal demon with horns and four arms. Which is weird and fascinating at the same time."

I force a smile. "That's great, Syl. I hope you have fun on your date tonight." My voice comes out breathy.

"Oh, I will. Even if the date doesn't work out. We're going to that new restaurant that opened in New Obernzell." Sylvia checks herself out in the mirror before turning to the door. "Don't wait up for us. Mom has her 'tarot reading' night." She does the air quotes with her fingers. "And I, hopefully, will be getting laid. Bye!"

The door slams shut. I release a huge sigh as I glare at Levi.

"Really? She could have seen us!" I hiss at him.

Under the blanket draped over my lap on the couch, Levi's fingers stroke my pussy over my panties. He teases, making me squirm with barely contained desire.

"I apologize," he says, not sounding apologetic at all.

On the TV screen, the horror movie ramps up, shrill violins screeching as the hapless protagonist creeps down a shadowy hallway. But I can hardly focus, not with Levi's

skilled fingers playing my body like an instrument, sending jolts of electric pleasure racing through my veins.

He chuckles when I shiver, his breath hot against my ear. "Something distracting you, love?"

"You know exactly what you're doing," I hiss, trying to sound annoyed even as my hips cant into his touch. "I'm trying to watch the movie," I lie. I don't give a single fuck about this movie. I don't even remember what I chose to watch.

"Mm, but isn't this more fun?" He dips his fingers into my panties. His thumb circles my clit and I have to bite back a moan. Slowly, maddeningly, he slides one long finger into my wet heat, then another, pumping in a steady rhythm as his heel massages my clit. "You're always so responsive for me, Lia. I love how eager your pretty little pussy is for my touch."

This demon drives me crazy. He's either giving all his attention to my stories, making me laugh, or making me come. There's not much more I could ever expect from a relationship.

I let my knees drop, giving him more space. My head falls back onto his shoulder. Levi closes his lips around my earlobe, nibbling until I get more shivers. Pleasure coils tighter and tighter in my core as his fingers work their magic, stoking the embers into an inferno. I'm wound so tightly, I'm sure the lightest touch will make me shatter.

My fingers curl around his thigh, my nails sinking into his flesh. He groans. I buck into his hand, chasing, chasing. I'm almost there... Almost.

Just as I'm teetering on the edge, Levi withdraws his hand. I whimper at the loss.

"No," I moan. "Please."

He hushes me. "There's no need to hide." He flicks his wrist. My pants disappear.

I gasp as Levi throws the sheets off. "Levi!" I cry out.

"Hush, love," he says, his voice extra low and sexy. "I'll hold the door if they come in." In one smooth motion, he pulls me onto his lap so I'm straddling his muscular thighs, my back against his chest.

I glance down. His pants are also mysteriously missing. "Did you use magic to take out our pants?"

Levi pushes my hair away and kisses my neck. "Mm." He sits back, sprawling with me on his chest. Cool air kisses my overheated skin as he spreads my legs wide, putting me on full display. "Much better," he purrs. "I want to watch you fall apart for me."

With a snap of his fingers, a large ornate mirror appears across from the couch, giving me a perfect view of myself. I gasp again and try to close my legs, but Levi holds them in place. My cheeks flush scarlet at the desperate picture I make—hair mussed, lips swollen, perched atop Levi's lap like his personal plaything. My pussy glistens, my wetness running down the inside of my thigh.

"Look at you. Utter perfection." His black eyes smolder with dark promise in the reflection as he parts my outer lips, clever fingers finding my throbbing clit once more. "So beautiful like this, spread out for my pleasure."

I can only sigh as he works me higher, need pulsing through me with every deliberate stroke. Levi shoves my shirt up, then rips it over my head, exposing my breasts, too. He palms one, groaning into my neck. My world narrows to the delicious drag of his

fingers over my sensitive flesh, the obscene wet sounds of my arousal, the heat of his body bracketing mine.

"That's it, love. Come for me," Levi coaxes, voice a sinful rasp. He pumps one, then two fingers into me, still working my clit. "I want to feel this greedy little cunt squeeze my fingers like a vice."

His filthy words are my undoing. Pressure shatters and I tumble into ecstasy with a scream, inner muscles clamping down on his fingers as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me. White lights pop in the back of my eyelids. I soar. Levi works me through it, prolonging the bliss until I collapse against his chest, spent and trembling.

"Good girl," he croons, petting my hair. "You did so well." He gives me a moment, then kisses the corner of my mouth. "Ready to take my cock?"

I can only nod. Keeping me turned to face the mirror, Levi readjusts me to free his huge, thick cock. It juts upwards from between my thighs, flushed a deep red and leaking copiously at the tip. I feel empty, aching to be filled by him.

As if reading my mind, he notches the broad head at my entrance. "Gonna feel so good stretching this tight little pussy with my cock. Nice and slow."

Two of his hands wrap around my waist. Inch by excruciating inch, Levi lowers me down, letting gravity impale me on his thick shaft. I watch, enraptured, as my body reluctantly yields to the invasion, swallowing him into my core. It's almost too much—the burn and stretch as he splits me open.

But the grooves and bumps? Holy fuck, it's pure bliss. It feels absolutely amazing. They caress my inner walls, doubling and tripling the pleasure. I watch it disappear inside me, my lips parted in amazement.

I would never do this with anyone else. Fuck with a mirror in front of me? With my legs spread open like that? Never. I can see the rolls in my stomach, how my hips look when I'm sitting, and how my breasts sag slightly because of their weight.

But with Levi? I'd do anything. He makes me feel powerful. Sexy.

Loved .

"Halfway there. You're doing amazing." Levi's gravelly praise washes over me like a benediction. "Knew you'd take me so well. Like this cunt was made just for me." With a third hand, he reaches between my thighs to massage my clit again. It's like he's obsessed with my pleasure.

When I'm finally fully seated, it knocks the breath from my lungs. I've never felt so full, so utterly consumed. He's buried almost to his knot, touching places inside me I didn't know existed.

For a moment we both pause, adjusting to the intensity of the moment. I reach out and touch the swollen skin of his knot.

Levi hisses, his cock twitching inside me. "Don't do that, love," he murmurs, his voice suddenly strained. "It's already a struggle not to come the second your pussy sucks me in."

So, his knot is extra sensitive. Good to know.

Levi grips my hips and starts to move, rolling his pelvis to grind his cock deep. He raises me slightly off his lap, then pulls me back down. I don't have to do anything, just enjoy. Savor.

But I want to. I want to make him feel good, too.

Leaning forward, I prop my hands on his knees. He's big enough he can still look at the mirror from over my shoulder. Tilting my hips, I search for his knot.

My clit rubs against it. It's pure bliss.

Levi hisses again. "Fuck, Lia."

I find my balance and grind my clit against his cock. His motions send sparks skittering up my spine and I throw my head back on a gasp, bouncing feverishly on his lap, grinding, grinding.

"Fuck. You're perfect, Lia. Squeezing me like a goddamn vice." The dirty praise spills from his lips as he pistons up into me, meeting every downward slam. "Love your sweet little pussy. You're going to fucking ruin me."

All I can do is hold on and take it as he sets a relentless pace, the wet slap of skin on skin obscene in the quiet room. The coil inside me winds tighter and tighter, my thighs trembling with strain. I'm so close, so close, and every grind of his knot against my clit drives me higher, promising the biggest of all orgasm.

"Come on my cock like a good girl."

His name is a broken prayer on my lips as the tension snaps and I unravel violently, my orgasm slamming into me like a tidal wave. I convulse around the thick length spearing me open, inner muscles rippling and grasping.

"Fuck!" With an animalistic snarl, Levi buries himself one last time and finds his own release. I feel the scorching heat of his come flood my core as he pulses inside me. More. Even more. He feels me to the brim. I feel so full of it it's uncomfortable. For a moment, I swear I see my lower abdomen distend, bloating.

Then Levi pulls out, and his come pours out of me, down his cock and legs. I shiver with aftershocks, my pussy clenching around the remnants of our orgasms. My body grows heavy. I struggle to catch my breath, leaning back into him again.

Levi gathers my limp, sated form into his strong arms, cradling me tenderly to his chest. He brushes sweaty tendrils of hair off my face and presses a kiss to my temple as I curl into his lap, basking in the afterglow.

I could spend forever like this.

My heart is full and warm. Emotion stings my eyes. I press my face into his neck.

I can't run from it. No, I can't escape the truth any longer. This was supposed to be fake. Levi doesn't belong here.

And yet I'm in love with him. For the first time in my life, I'm in love with someone. Aproud, arrogant, frustrating demon king who swept into my life and changed everything. And I'm absolutely petrified. Because now I have so much more to lose.

CHAPTER 21

CORDELIA

The warmth of the apple cider seeps through the paper cup into my fingers. Levi reaches for my hand, but I cradle the cup with both. It's silly and immature, but I'm afraid. My heart twists, a bittersweet ache. The wedding is but a few days away.

Miranda hasn't found a solution, but she believes that, since I didn't use blood, there's a chance the spell will wear off. My deal with Levi was until the wedding. He'll soon return to Hell, leaving me behind like everyone else. Just another temporary presence in my life.

From the beginning, I knew he wouldn't stay. And yet, I was foolish enough to let myself hope.

Levi studies me, black eyes probing. Today, he's back in black dress pants and a t-shirt. Like the first time I saw him. "You seem distracted, Lia. Everything alright? You barely touched your pumpkin spice latte this morning."

I swallow past the lump in my throat. The nights we shared are seared into my brain. I'll never forget how he focused always on my pleasure. How good he felt inside me. And how he makes me feel sexy and powerful.

But this entire thing was supposed to be fake. He's from a literal different plane of existence. And he's a king. He doesn't seem anxious about how hell is faring without him, but I know he can't stay away forever.

He's having a vacation, but it's only a vacation when you get to go home. To your stuff, your friends, your routine. Levi enjoys spending time with me now, but would he enjoy my nine-to-five routine? My working late hours sometimes and the noisy big city and not walking outside because it's raining or snowing for days in a row?

This was a mistake. I shouldn't have done the spell and I shouldn't have masturbated with the icon and I definitely shouldn't have lied about having a boyfriend.

Above all that, I shouldn't have slept with him. That's a line I shouldn't have crossed. Now, my heart's in it, too. I'm too far gone and seeing him leave will only hurt.

"Maybe we shouldn't have slept together," I murmur, staring at the sidewalk. "Our deal is almost done. My vacation is almost over. I'll be going home soon and we needed to focus on figuring out how to unbind ourselves. Otherwise, you'll be stuck here forever. Because of me."

Silence hangs heavy between us as we continue walking. The wind whispers through the trees, sending a shower of golden leaves cascading around us. They're falling much faster now. Some trees are already naked.

"Cordelia, there's something I have to?"

"I have to—" We both start speaking at the same moment, then break off.

A wry smile tugs at Levi's lips. He inclines his head. "Go on."

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. My hands shake. "I'm tired of the pretending, Levi. Of lying to everyone. We got... distracted by the mind-blowing sex. And multiple orgasms." My face goes hot. "But in a few days, that will just be a memory when you go back to Hell and I return to my life. We need to focus on breaking this binding."

Something flickers in Levi's dark eyes, but he remains silent. He nods once, his expression distant. Unreadable.

I hug my cider close, letting the warmth seep into my chilled fingers. My heart hurts, but it's going to hurt either way. Did I do the right thing, pushing him away? My heart whispers that I'm being a coward, afraid of vulnerability. Afraid of being left behind again.

But it's better this way. Better to end it now before I fall any deeper. Before I give him the power to break me.

"What were you going to say?" I whisper, staring at my feet.

"Nothing." He walks on. I pick up my pace to follow.

And I can't help but wonder—did I just ruin this forever?

CHAPTER 22

CORDELIA

The Thorns have a massive farm at the edge of town. As kids, we'd sometimes ride our bikes—Syl carrying me—to the farm, and we'd spend afternoons running around. It was the few times I felt like part of the group, even though I was always the last one to be chosen for teams, then only chosen because Sylvia threatened the other kids.

When Marcus and I started to date, we'd spend our weekends in town, most likely hanging out with his friends or watching movies on Miranda's couch. It took me many years to realize how rich the Thorns were.

And this wedding is it. They truly spared no expense.

The ceremony was in the open area near the lake. Not a pond. Lake. Patio heaters were placed strategically near the chairs. The sky is gray, but it didn't rain. The area glittered with a thousand points of light and so many flowers that I spent half the ceremony terrified of sneezing.

The party is inside a repurposed barn. The whole town is here and more. Mr. Thorn, Marcus's father, must have all his business associates with him in the VIP area. Lightscast a warm glow across the elegant chairs and polished marble floors. An orchestra plays a romantic, lyrical melody that swells and dances through the air. Vivian floats amid the crowd in a resplendent gown of lace and silk, a flowing train trailing behind her.

Sylvia leans closer to me as we stand next to our table, waiting to greet the newlyweds. “Do I like Marcus? No,” she whispers. “But you should have married him. He was rich rich.” She glances at Levi. “No offense, Levi.”

“None taken.”

I elbow her. “He’s not rich,” I whisper back. “His dad is rich. It’s different.”

Sylvia raises a hand for me to high-five her. “Yes. Meritocracy, my ass.”

I chuckle, though there’s not much humor to it. The end of October brings not only the wedding and Halloween, but the end of my vacation and the end of my deal with Levi. And oh, how I wish this had gone differently.

Beside me, Levi scoffs under his breath. “Being rich doesn’t mean much if you don’t have taste. I’ve seen weddings on 90 Days Fiancé that were less over-the-top than this.” His deep voice rumbles with wry amusement. He narrows his eyes when he looks up. “Seriously. Why are there so many lights? It feels like the sun’s here with us.”

A laugh bubbles up my throat before I can stop it. Several heads turn to stare at me in disapproval. Biting my lip, I elbow Levi on his muscular side, trying not to focus on the way his dark suit hugs his powerful frame.

“Behave,” I hiss through my teeth. “Our track record already sucks. It’s Vivian’s big day. Let her have her princess wedding.”

“They’re going to take forever to get here,” says Miranda, sighing as she drops into her chair. “I’m too old for this. Let me know when Vivian comes this way.”

Sylvia scoffs. “Not me. I’m going after something to drink.”

I grab her elbow as she tries to sneak off. “Syl, really? What if she comes?” I stare at my best friend, mentally telling her I need the support.

Sylvia, stunning in a gold dress, takes my hands in hers and kisses my cheek. “Babe. Levi’s right here. I’m pretty sure he’ll kick her out of her own wedding if she bothers you.” She grins at Levi. “Right, Levi?”

“Absolutely.”

“See?” Syl winks at me, then walks out, searching the barn for the bar.

I run my fingers through my straightened hair, then adjust my long-sleeve velvet dress. The bateau neckline shows my collarbones and a thin silver choker. It has a slightly empire waistline that I think is super classic. The dark blue of the velvet goes well with my eyes. I shift in the square heels, but one look at Levi and I’m comfortable again.

Though I bought the dress where I live, Levi has magic on his fingertips, and he came up with his suit five minutes before we left. He’s a well-cut royal blue suit with a light blue button-down shirt and a red tie. His dark hair is perfectly combed back, though I never saw him touch a brush.

Levi is drop-dead handsome as always, even in his human form. And I’m not the only one who thinks that. Several other people sneak glances at him here and there, my aunts included.

Wicked pride coils inside my chest like a snake. I had him. I had his cock inside me, his fingers in my hair and his mouth on mine. He cooked me dinner. He brought me breakfast. We laugh at each other’s jokes.

But he’s not mine, is he? He’ll never be.

His arm brushes mine. We're so close, but we don't touch. I have to remind myself to keep my distance.

Levi's fingertips brush my cheek. I turn at him, surprised. Heat floods my cheeks as if he had read my mind.

"What's on your mind?" he murmurs.

I stare at his black eyes for a moment, then decide for the truth. "Today is...today's the last day."

I have to force the words out past the painful lump rising in my throat. The last day of our deal. We're leaving. We're leaving so soon and I don't want to think about it.

After today, he'll return to hell and I'll go back to my quiet, lonely life. The thought pierces like a shard of ice through my heart.

Despite my best efforts, despite all the walls I put up to protect myself... I've fallen hopelessly in love with this infuriating, charming, complicated demon. With his razor-sharp wit and arrogant smirk, his unexpected moments of tenderness, the electric heat of his touch. And now I have to let him go.

Levi's brow furrows. "It doesn't have to be the last day, Lia. Not if you don't want it to be."

"But I do," I insist, blinking back the sting of tears. God, what am I doing? And in public? "We're too different, Levi," I whisper. "You're literally from a different realm. This—us—it was never going to work long term. You know that."

"Maybe I don't give a fuck about different realms or long-term plans," he whispers back. His fingers curl around my arm, burning through my sleeve. Something like

desperation flashes across his face. “Maybe all I care about is?—”

“Cordelia!” Vivian chirps. She makes her way toward us with a grin, pulling Marcus along.

I take a deep breath, bracing myself. This is it. The last charade of my fake relationship.

CHAPTER 23

CORDELIA

2 Vivian's shrill voice pierces the air. "Thanks for coming, guys." She kisses the air next to Miranda's cheeks, then Cordelia's. She gives me a once-over. "Hi, Levi.." She props her hands onto her waist. "How do I look?"

What am I supposed to answer in these situations? "White."

Vivian laughs too loud. "You're so funny. I get what Cordelia sees in you."

Cordelia and I exchange a glance. Weird. Vivian's been treating me like shit since we met. What changed?

"And Lia!" She smiles sweetly—too sweetly—at Cordelia. "This dress is so unique. It really highlights your curves. You're so brave to wear it."

My humor sours. There it is. Back-handed compliments. How can this woman be such a coward? How can she invite her own cousin to her wedding, then treat her like this?

I don't know if I'm angry or just pitying her. What a sad existence.

Vivian goes on, because of course she would. "You know, you didn't have to bring Levi over." She grins, leaning forward and cupping the side of her mouth as if telling a secret. "I know you and Levi are not really dating."

Cordelia chuckles. “What? What do you mean?”

Vivian waves Cordelia off. “I overheard you two talking in the park—about pretending !” Vivian chuckles. “Of course you were talking about your relationship. Your pretend relationship. I was going to meet Marcus there. He said he had just seen you and I told him,” she pulls Marcus closer, “remember, baby? I told you, oh, they’re fake dating! There’s no way a guy like Levi would date Cordelia. They’re just too different.”

Murmurs ripple through the crowd. Stunned faces turn toward Cordelia, whose cheeks flame crimson. She shrinks into herself, her hands curling into fists.

A volcano roars inside me.

“Vivian, surely you misheard...” Miranda laughs nervously, trying to smooth things over. But Vivian steamrolls on.

“Oh, please, he’s way out of her league. I always knew it!” Her green eyes glitter. “Marcus, shush!” She swats at her new husband as he attempts to quiet her. “I’m helping her. I’m just saying she doesn’t have to lie anymore.” And under her breath, she adds, “That reeks of desperation. Not very elegant, is it?”

White-hot rage sears through me. My fists clench as I stalk forward, towering over Vivian. “You’re one to talk about desperation,” I snarl. “Shaming your own cousin at your wedding? When she came here just for it? How insecure can you get?”

Marcus jumps in, jabbing a finger at my chest. “Stay out of it. I knew you were using Cordelia. I don’t even know what you’re still doing here.”

I bare my teeth, relishing how he flinches back. Oh, the things I’d do to this fucker. He’s the one who started this whole shit. He cheated on Cordelia. He hurt her even if

she didn't love him. This fucker is one of the many who broke her trust.

"Enough!" Cordelia's voice cracks like a whip. Angry tears glitter in her blue eyes. "I don't even know why I came. Family ," she spits. "Blood family means nothing if there's no love. None of you were there for us when Dad left Mom. None of you gave a shit when Mom died and I was alone." Her voice breaks. "Miranda and Sylvia are the only real family I have. But still, I tried to meet your expectations. Even though you've never liked me." Cordelia's shoulder square and her eyes glitter and fuck—am I more attracted to her than before? "Vivian, you shouldn't need to put others down just to feel good about yourself," Cordelia says, her voice trembling. She turns to Marcus, blue eyes flashing. "And you're nothing but a cheater. And Vivian knows that. That's why she's so insecure. Because she knows that once a cheater, always a cheater." A bitter laugh escapes her. "I never should've forced myself to come here, to pretend, just because of you two. You don't deserve it."

Vivian's eyes go huge. Her face goes ashen, then crumples. Tears streak down her cheeks. "You've ruined everything!" she wails, jabbing a finger at Cordelia. "You've ruined my wedding!"

Marcus's face flushes an ugly red. He rounds on me, meaty fists clenched. "You bastard," he snarls, taking a step forward. "I'll teach you to mess with my family!"

Cold fury crystallizes in my chest. I draw myself up to my full height, my presence expanding to fill the room. The air thickens, crackling with dark energy.

"Try," I hiss between my teeth.

Marcus's eyes widen. He staggers back, knees buckling. His mouth opens and closes soundlessly as he sinks to the floor in front of me. My ears pop with the change in pressure. I let my magic seep out of me. I let him feel who he's dealing with.

“Apologize.” My voice is low, dangerous. “Now.”

“I-I’m sorry!” he babbles, his gaze flicking to Cordelia. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean?—”

“Levi, stop!” Cordelia cries out. “Please, just stop.”

I turn to her, the darkness dissipating. My heart stutters in my chest.

Tears stream down her freckled cheeks, her blue eyes wide and glassy. A choked sob bursts out of her, and then she’s running, her dark blue dress fluttering as she disappears out the door.

Shame, hot and cloying, rises in my throat. What have I done?

Cordelia’s right. We’re too different. We’re too different because this is who I am. A monster. I should have known better than to think I could ever be a part of her world.

I’m a fool. And now I’ve lost her.

The crowd parts to one side. Sylvia barges toward us. She glances at Cordelia, running, then at Vivian, bawling.

Sylvia kicks her heels out and pounces on Vivian.

CHAPTER 24

CORDELIA

Tears blur my vision as I stride to Sylvia's car, only then remembering Miranda has the keys. I don't want to go back. I can't go back in there. Vivian had to humiliate me in front of all those people and now she'll try to make me feel guilty for ruining her wedding .

I can't believe it's taken me this long to accept all this. My whole life I wanted a family. I lost my father, then my mother, and still I tried to prove myself worthy and good and deserving of my family, even when they didn't like me. Even when they never tried.

I was wrong. So incredibly wrong. You don't have to prove yourself to deserve love. Everyone deserves it. Everyone. Including me.

Sylvia and Miranda are my family. Levi would be if we... No. What am I thinking? I have to get out of here. I want to go home. But how?

The sound of heels clack behind me. I don't dare look back. There's a slight chance Vivian chased me to keep screaming.

Miranda glides to a stop next to me, her flowing silver hair swishing over her shoulders. Her deep brown eyes widen as she takes in my disheveled state. "Oh, my darling. I'll get you home. Don't worry." In two seconds flat, Miranda has fished the keys out of her purse and strode to the driver's door.

A choked sob escapes my throat as I crumple onto the passenger seat. Miranda puts her purse on her lap, picks up her phone and, after typing a message, she turns on the car.

I bury my face in my hands and weep.

“It was awful,” I manage to say between hiccuping breaths. “Vivian... she told everyone that Levi and I are fake. That our relationship is a sham. She humiliated me in front of the whole town.” Fresh tears spill down my cheeks as the sting of Vivian’s words pierces my heart anew.

Miranda strokes my hair, her touch soothing. “Oh, my poor darling. I’m so sorry you had to endure that. I was so shocked at how rude she was. I’m sorry. I should have done something.”

I glance over my shoulder as we leave the farm. “What about Syl and Levi?”

“I’ll pick them up later. Let’s get you out of here first.”

I meet her gaze with pleading eyes. “Miranda, please, you have to help me break the binding spell. I can’t keep Levi trapped with me like this. It’s not fair to him.”

“But did you ask him?” she asks. “What he thinks? If he wants to leave?”

“He’s king of Hell. He has to leave.” I shake my head. “I... I love him. I love Levi, and I can’t bear the thought of him being with me out of obligation.”

Miranda’s brow furrows. She stares at the road for five more minutes while I cry my eyes out.

“Lia,” she murmurs, so gently. “There’s something I need to tell you. I’m sorry I hid

this from you, but it was pretty obvious from the start for me.”

My shoulders stiffen. More betrayal. Is Miranda going to abandon me like everyone else?

“What?” I ask, afraid of her answer.

“There is no binding spell.”

I blink, confusion replacing my anguish. “What? But the summoning...”

She takes my hand in hers, her skin warm and reassuring. “Only blood binds. That’s an old adage in magic.” She glances at me. “Did you use blood?”

I shake my head.

“Then there’s no binding. I tried some spells to break it, but they did nothing. They did nothing because there was nothing to break. No binding.”

“But... but...” This makes no sense.

“The runes you drew were for a love summoning, yes. But the difference is, you managed to customize the spell. To your very essence. Leviathan responded to your soul, not some arbitrary magical command.” She takes a beat. “You didn’t summon the devil. You summoned the creature whose soul responded to yours. Coincidentally, it was the devil.”

Shock ripples through me, my mind reeling as I try to process her words. “You mean... he could have left any time?”

Miranda nods. “Yes, I believe so. He was summoned, sure, but he could leave.”

“And he... chose to be with me? Out of his own free will?”

A soft smile plays on her lips. “Is that so hard to believe? The connection between you two is real, Lia. It’s not fabricated by any spell or enchantment. You two have fun together. He respects you. He’s in constant awe of you. It’s obvious to anyone who watches you together.”

Hope flutters in my chest, fragile and tentative. “But... If we weren’t bound... Why did he say we were?”

Miranda presses her lips together, then shakes her head. “That, you’ll have to ask him.”

We park in front of the house. I step out of the car and into Miranda’s arms. She holds me tightly in the night chill.

With a hand around my waist, she guides me inside the house. “Come on,” she says. “Let’s make some tea and I’ll pick them up. We’re going to pop a wine bottle open and talk shit about Vivian the whole night.” Miranda unlocks the door and motions me in. “That little bitch.”

I can’t help but chuckle as I step inside. Not a minute later, a shimmering portal rips open in the middle of the living room. My heart skips a beat. Miranda grabs my arm, pulling me back.

Leviathan steps through, his imposing figure filling the space. I relax. He has someone over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“Sylvia?” I cry out. My best friend looks up. Her dress is torn at the shoulder. The hairdo is ruined. Her face is covered in scratches. “Were you fighting a cat?”

“No,” Sylvia says with a grin. “A bitch.”

The portal disappears. Levi drops his human facade in favor of the demon one. “Sorry for the delay,” Levi grunts, setting Sylvia down. “Had to untangle this menace from Vivian’s hair.”

Miranda and I stare at Sylvia. Miranda props her hands onto her hips. “You were fighting Sylvia?” she asks.

Sylvia studies her dress. “That bitch ruined my clothes. At least they were secondhand.” She looks up at me with a victorious grin. “I told you she didn’t deserve my hard-earned money. I ripped her earring off.” She raises her hand to show it. “Pretty sure I’m getting sued.”

Miranda’s jaw drops. “Sylvia!”

I cackle. Maybe we’re all going crazy. I fling my arms around my best friend. “You’re amazing,” I tell her.

“No!” She holds me back. “ You are amazing. I heard you telling her off. Throwing the truth in her face. That was amazing. I’m so sad I missed it.” Syl lets me go, then wipes my cheeks. “What happened? What finally finally finally triggered you?”

I chuckle, then slap her arm. “She figured out Levi and I were faking.”

Sylvia makes a face. “What? She’s a dumb bitch, then. You were only faking in the beginning. This,” she points between the two of us, “has become real a long while ago.”

I bite onto my lower lip, unsure what to say. “Why do you think that?”

Syl starts toward the kitchen. “Bitch, your bedroom smells like a brothel.”

Blood rushes into my face. “Sylvia!”

Miranda cackles, then waves me off. “I’ll check on her cut. Maybe she needs a rabies shot.”

Levi and I are alone then. My heart rushes. I wonder if I should tell him the truth about my feelings. About...

Wait. “You... you could travel like that this whole time?”

He tilts his head. “Yes.”

“And you said nothing?”

His black eyes are unreadable. God, why can’t I get a read of him? “Yes.” He shrugs. “I like to walk. You seem to like it, too. I thought it was a chance to spend time together.”

“Levi.” I stand in front of him, staring, forcing myself to confront him. “Miranda told me there’s no binding.” He doesn’t react. “You knew.”

Levi licks his lips, then sighs. His shoulders droop. “Yeah. I could have gone back to the underworld whenever I wanted. But I didn’t. I chose to stay.”

“Why?” I demand, my voice trembling. “Wait. You don’t have to tell me. You’ve already told me that. A vacation from your responsibilities.”

He takes a step closer, his presence filling my senses. “Love, listen to me. I stayed because I wanted to. Because I...” He falters, his words trailing off.

Bitter laughter escapes my lips. “Because you what? Wanted to use me? Toy with my emotions for your own amusement? Or was it because you knew that if I was desperate enough to get a fake boyfriend, that I would be desperate enough to sleep with you?”

Levi’s jaw clenches, his eyes flashing with pain. “You’re one to talk about using people. Wasn’t that the whole point of summoning me in the first place? And weren’t you using me when you offered the deal? Don’t lie to yourself. The both of us had things to gain.”

His words cut deep, the truth in them undeniable. We stare at each other, the air crackling with tension and unspoken emotions.

I’ve never seen such pain on Levi’s face. “You were incredibly brave out there. Really,” he says in a low voice. “I’m proud of you for standing up to her. But I... I don’t belong here, Cordelia. I’m not good enough for you. We tend to forget it, but I am a monster. I should go back to where I came from.”

Tears sting my eyes as I nod, my heart shattering into a million jagged pieces. “Yeah, you should. Go back to Hell, Leviathan. I’m sorry for dragging you into it.”

He holds my gaze for a long moment, a myriad of emotions swirling in the depths of his black eyes. Pain, regret, longing. Then, with a final, agonizing look, he turns and steps back through the portal, vanishing from my life as suddenly as he had entered it.

As the shimmering gateway closes, I drop onto the couch, my body wracked with sobs. Sylvia rushes from the kitchen and hugs me. And there, in the quiet of our living room, I allow myself to shatter, to mourn the loss of a love I never truly had.

CHAPTER 25

CORDELIA

I burrow deeper under the sheets. The bed feels cold and empty, a vast wasteland of loneliness threatening. Silent tears soak into my pillow as I clutch it.

God. I feel so pathetic. This is not how I wanted to end this vacation.

A soft knock interrupts my wallowing. “Hey! Are you awake? I brought you a pumpkin spice latte, your favorite candy, and our costumes for today.” Sylvia’s cheery voice filters through the door. “It’s Halloween, remember? Let’s have some fun! We had planned on getting drunk and dressing up, remember?”

I sigh, knowing she won’t relent until I emerge from my cocoon of misery. Reluctantly, I sit up, the blankets pooling around my waist. “Come in, Syl.”

She bursts in with a radiant smile. Perching on the edge of my bed, Sylvia hands me the latte, its warmth and spicy aroma bringing a ghost of a smile to my face.

“Thanks,” I murmur, taking a tentative sip. The sweet, creamy flavor washes over my tongue. I hum in delight, though a part of me aches with the memory of Levi bringing me the very same drink.

Sylvia’s brow furrows with concern as she studies my tear-stained face. “Oh, Lia, babe... I know it hurts, losing Levi like that. I’m so sorry he left.” She sighs. “He seemed so nice. For a demon, anyway. He made you laugh, and I really thought he

was in love with you.”

I avert my gaze, focusing on the whipped cream melting into my coffee. “It’s not just Levi. It’s... everyone. They always leave, Syl. My dad, my mom... I think I’m scared to let anyone else in. Falling in love is too risky when abandonment is inevitable.”

Sylvia reaches out, gripping my hand. Her brown eyes shine with unwavering support. “Lia, listen to me. Not everyone will leave. The people who truly love you, like me? We’re here to stay, no matter what. You have to trust that love is worth the risk.” She smiles. “Love is about vulnerability. How are you going to have a healthy, happy relationship without ever opening up?”

Her words strike a chord deep within me, igniting a flicker of hope amidst the darkness. Maybe she’s right. Maybe I can’t let fear control my life anymore. The times I opened up with Levi were amazing. He was also vulnerable with me and he made me feel safe.

And maybe, just maybe, Levi is worth fighting for.

I squeeze Sylvia’s hand back, a spark of determination rising in my chest. “You’re right, Syl. I... I want to go after him.”

“Wait.” She raises her hands, shaking her head. “Hold on. I was talking about relationships as a whole. We’re not going after the guy who broke up with you. Let him grovel if he wants a piece of you.”

Blinking in confusion, I stare at her. “He didn’t break up with me.”

“What do you mean? You think it doesn’t count because of the fake dating thing? No, no, no, it does count, and...”

“No, Syl. I’m the one who sent him away. He said I was right, that we’re too different, and he agreed to leave.”

Sylvia, with her messy bun, her scratched face, and her warm brown eyes, stares at me as if I ‘m the one with four arms. “You broke up with him.”

“Yeah.”

She slaps both hands over her face, grunting in frustration. “Oh, my god, Cordelia Dallimore! You really pushed someone you love away because you’re afraid he doesn’t love you back?”

“Yeah...”

“The man—the devil, whatever—he’s obsessed with you! Obviously! Do you really think he was watching all those bad horror movies because he likes them? Do you really think he was spending his day walking up and down this town when he could teleport just because? He’s obviously in love with you!” She throws her hands up. “He didn’t even watch those movies! He spent half the time watching you!”

My heart races. “Did he?”

“Yes!” Sylvia cackles. “Get up. Shower. Change. We’re going after him.”

I shoot to my feet. Yes. Yes, I want that. I want to see Levi again. I want to tell him how I feel.

At least I need to try. “Do you think... could we do another spell?” I ask her. “Maybe a communication spell? Or a way to find him? I have no idea how to reach out for him.” At least without dying.

Sylvia's face lights up with excitement. "Of course! I'll grab Love Spells & Rituals and I'll talk to Mom."

Once I'm showered and dressed in a pair of leggings and a cute shirt with a nice cleavage—he does love my breasts—I go after Sylvia in the living room.

Sylvia looks up, a gleam in her eye. "So, I think the woods are our best bet. You know how I've been to New Obernzell for that date? They're ten times crazier about paranormal stuff than we're here. They say the Devil's Mountain is magic. That there's a monster called a Krampus there, and he kind of rules over all the other creatures. Plus," she motions with her phone in hand, "today is Halloween and everyone knows that the veil grows thin or something like that. It's perfect for opening a portal." She grins, victorious.

I nod, nerves fluttering in my stomach at the thought of seeing Levi again. "It's amazing that I'm the one with the magic powers, but you're the one with the brains."

She laughs. "Am I your familiar?"

"I told you. You're the Salem to my Sabrina." I squeeze her as tight as possible. "Let's do it."

We head out into the crisp autumn air, the streets of Shadow Glen teeming with costumed tourists. Driving is going to be a nightmare, so when Sylvia spots a bike rental stand, she grins at me.

"You know, since you're conquering all your fears, maybe we should ride a bike there."

I blanch, eyeing the innocent-looking bicycles with trepidation. She's right. She's absolutely right. Besides, if we went on foot, we'd take a couple of hours to get there.

Half an hour later, I'm wobbling down the leaf-strewn path, Sylvia coaching me as I struggle to keep the bike upright. The damp, earthy scent of the woods envelops us, ancient trees standing sentinel on either side.

"You're doing great, Lia!" Sylvia calls. "Just keep pedaling!"

I grit my teeth, but keep going. For a moment, I teeter dangerously, sure I'm about to topple over. But then, miraculously, I find my balance. The bike surges forward, the wind whipping through my hair as a giddy laugh bubbles up from my chest.

Sylvia whoops with delight, pride shining in her eyes as we ride into the forest. In this moment, with the unwavering support of my best friend, anything feels possible. Even winning back the heart of a demon king.

We reach a clearing, our cheeks flushed with the exercise. As Sylvia prepares the portal spell, I close my eyes, picturing Levi's face. The wind blows colder. I tug my coat closer to my body.

"Here," Syl says, her teeth chattering as she pushes her phone into my hand. "I made a circle with stones and put the items inside. You just have to think hard about him and read the incantation."

My heart jumps to my throat as I begin the incantation, my voice rising and falling with the strange words. I hold my breath, my heart pounding in anticipation. Please let this work.

I keep going, even as the forest seems to grow too dark for such an early hour. The air pressure changes. My ears pop, but I keep going. I reach the end of the spell.

Nothing.

Sylvia, her arms crossed over her chest as she shivers, says, “We should wait a while. We learned that it might take a while, right?”

“And just what do you think you’re doing?”

We whirl around, coming face to face with a towering figure that seems to have materialized out of the shadows. For a second, I think it’s Levi. That it worked. That he came for me.

But no. It’s not Levi.

This monster has blue skin, white hair, and a pair of wicked horns. He’s massive, even bigger than Levi. He looks like he’s about to whip us.

This has to be Krampus.

Sylvia squeaks in terror, instinctively grabbing my arm. But I stand my ground, staring up at the forest ruler with a defiant tilt to my chin. After Levi, this guy’s imposing aura is almost familiar.

“What’s going on?” A second figure emerges from the trees, all curves and cascading dark hair.

A human. That’s... unexpected.

Krampus crosses his arms. “Portals are not playthings, humans,” he shoots at me. “Especially not on All Hallows’ Eve.”

The human grins, waving at us. “Hi. I’m Olivia.”

Sylvia and I exchange a glance. “Cordelia,” I say, pointing at my chest. “My best

friend, Sylvia.” I point at her, who waves back.

“ This is the exact reason why we’re here,” Krampus roars. “To keep portals shut. These portals only open with my permission.”

“And when you forget to close them,” adds Olivia.

Krampus shoots her a withering glare, but it clearly has no effect. He snaps his attention back to me. “You shouldn’t be here. Go back to your human town.”

“But she’s in love!” Sylvia blurts out. “Leviathan was here, and they fell in love, but Lia pushed him away because she has abandonment issues, but I swear she’s improving. I swear I’ll make her see a therapist. Please, please! She has to get him back!”

Olivia’s eyes widen, a slow smile spreading across her face. “Ooh, how romantic!”

Krampus pinches the bridge of his nose, exasperated. “Liv, we can’t just let them?—“

But Olivia is already turning to him, batting her lashes. “Please? For true love? For me? I’m your mate. You wouldn’t refuse me that.”

Krampus lowers his voice, bending to talk to Olivia. “You can’t keep adopting strays, woman. What kind of lord of the woods do you take me for?”

“The generous kind.” She grins. It takes everything in me not to laugh, but mostly because I’m nervous.

Krampus looks at Sylvia, who jerks closer to me. “You said Leviathan.”

“Yes,” I burst out. “Big guy. Four arms. Red skin. Horns.”

“Fuck,” says Krampus. “The king of the underworld? What the fuck?”

Olivia’s smile turns into an all-knowing smile. “Oh, you’re a monster-fucker, too, aren’t you?” And she throws her head back and laughs.

Sylvia laughs with her. Krampus and I groan in unison.

I hold my breath as Krampus regards his mate, his stony expression wavering. Finally, with a long, suffering sigh, he relents.

“Fine. But just for the evening.” He fixes me with a stern glare. “And don’t make me regret this.”

Relief floods through me as Krampus waves his hand. The space between two oak trees at the edge of the clearing darkens, then opens like a slit in the space-time fabric. The portal shimmers invitingly. I give Sylvia a quick, fierce hug.

“Wish me luck.”

She squeezes me tight. “Go get your man, Lia. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“No, you’re not,” says Krampus. “You’re going back to the edge of the forest. Olivia and I will wait for her. It’s dangerous in here. You humans have no sense of survival.” And he shoots his mate a glare. She grins and bats her lashes at him.

“Thanks, Krampus.” I smile. With a final nod to Syl, I step through the portal, my heart soaring with hope. As the world dissolves around me, a raven’s cry echoes through the air.

CHAPTER 26

LEVIATHAN

I lounge upon my throne of obsidian, barely stifling a yawn as yet another demon drones on about some petty land dispute in the outer abyss. The Citadel's vaulted ceilings stretch high above us, but even this monumental architecture can't ease my boredom.

My prolonged absence has left an obnoxious mountain of trivialities to address. I tap my claws against the armrest, a staccato beat of impatience.

Fuck, I miss Cordelia.

Every little thing reminds me of her, but that must be because I'm so stupidly in love I can barely think of anything else. She takes my thoughts at all moments. All this time, I knew I'd have to leave her.

It still hurts like fuck. I've regretted it a hundred times over in the last two hours.

I see it now. There's a reason I had never fallen in love. That's because I hadn't met her yet. And now, I'll never see her again.

Fuck, I should have stayed. I should have asked, begged, and pleaded on my knees to stay. No one's ever made me feel loved and understood like she did.

Without her, I'm just the king of hell. With her, I'm Levi.

A flutter of wings catches my eye. A raven flies into the hall, over the heads of the hundreds of demons waiting to see me, then alights on my shoulder. How unusual. It's been years since I last received a messenger.

Leaning in, the raven whispers, "Cordelia. Hell."

What. The. Fuck.

I shoot to my feet, an explosive roar tearing from my throat. The Citadel quakes as my fury manifests, blue flames erupting in the braziers. The demons in the hall scatter before me like roaches. The raven flies off, cawing.

"Cordelia is in Hell?" My snarl reverberates through the grand hall. "Is she dead?" I whirl around, searching for my assistant.

They bow low. "My lord, I'm not sure?—"

"Cordelia Dallimore. Is she dead?" Fucking hell, if she died... If she died when I could have saved her... My hands shake, my heart racing so fast I'm sure it'll jump out of my rib cage.

"I'll have to check," says my assistant. "We don't know her precise location. It may take some time to?—"

"Find her. NOW." I turn around to my guards. "No one fucking touches a hair on her head until I see her. Understood?" I bark. The guards nod, bow, then rush out of the room.

My Cordelia, my sweet shining light, alone in this blasted hellscape? I picture her cornflower eyes wide with fear, her porcelain skin smudged with brimstone. She must be so scared.

Unacceptable.

I storm from the Citadel Palace, a tempest of wrath and despair. Hell itself will tremble before the devil's rage at anyone who dares harm my mate.

CHAPTER 27

CORDELIA

“What were you thinking?” Levi’s deep voice reverberates through the cavernous space as he guides me into a room. “You could have gotten hurt. You could have died. A thousand horrible things could have happened.” He slams the door shut behind him, then pinches the bridge of his nose. “If a demon had touched you, I’d have to dismember and gut them. Would you have liked that?”

I chew on my bottom lip, finding worried Levi too amusing. “No.”

“No?” He glares at me. “Are you sure? Because you did walk into Hell like you were walking into the Witch’s Brew.”

“You found me as soon as I arrived.” I don’t know how he did it, but he instantly knew I was in hell. Krampus’s portal led me into a massive hallway in what had to be a palace. Not a minute after that, Levi burst through the doors, screaming his head out.

Levi drops onto a massive armchair, releasing a sigh. “You really drive me crazy.”

I lift my head, studying the place we walked in. It looks like a study of sorts. The obsidian walls are etched with softly glowing runes, towering bookcases are stuffed with ancient tomes, and a massive mahogany desk is piled high with scrolls and parchment. The air hangs heavy with the scent of leather and that scratch in the nose that I’ve come to associate with magic.

“Is this where you work?” I ask him, trying to sound casual.

“Cordelia. You put yourself at risk,” he growls, his eyes flashing. “There are places in here that could eat you alive. You’d have disappeared and it would take forever for me to find you.”

I shrink back, heart pounding. “I didn’t know what else to do. The way we ended things... I hated it. And then, I had no way of contacting you.” Tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

Leviathan's stern expression softens. With a sigh, he reaches out, offering a hand. I take it and he tugs me closer, between his knees. He’s still taller than me, even when he’s sitting. He cups my face, his thumb brushing away an errant tear. “Lia, I was worried sick. If anything happened to you...” He shakes his head, unable to finish the thought. “I can’t even think about it.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, leaning into his touch. “For what I said before, for pushing you away. I... I’ve been so afraid of falling in love. My whole life, I’ve been betrayed and abandoned over and over. I was a coward.”

“No, I was a coward,” Leviathan interrupts. “Love has always seemed like a liability, a weakness. But with you...” He takes a shuddering breath. “I’m in love with you, Cordelia. Irrevocably, undeniably. And I’m so sorry for keeping secrets, for not being fully honest with you. I never meant to hurt you.” He traces my cheekbones, my lips. “I lied about the binding because I wanted to stay close to you. I lied about coming back because I didn’t want to leave your side. And at first, I thought it could never work. But now... Now I can’t stop thinking about what we had.”

Was Sylvia right all along? My heart soars. Tears sting my eyes. He’s in love with me
!

Before I can respond, he leans down and captures my lips with his. I melt against him, savoring the intoxicating scent of smoke and spice that clings to his skin. His tongue teases the seam of my mouth and I grant him entrance, moaning softly as he explores me. As he kisses me like he missed me.

I kiss him back. I put everything into that kiss. My apologies, my love, my fears. I cling to him and he holds me back with all four of his arms.

We finally break apart, chests heaving. "I love you too, Levi," I murmur. "So much that it terrifies me. But I don't want to run from it anymore."

Leviathan grins, his fangs glinting in the flickering candlelight. "It was never fake for me, Lia. Never a ruse or a ploy. From the moment I first saw you, I was lost."

He kisses me again, slower this time, a promise of forever sealed against my lips. As we part, a thought occurs to me. "Should we make a new contract, then?" I ask breathlessly. "Something binding, now that things have changed between us?"

Leviathan chuckles, the sound dark and sensual. "Oh my love," he purrs, "real lovers don't need a contract. You already own my heart, body, and soul." His onyx eyes blaze with desire and adoration.

"So, what now?" I ask, snuggling into his chest. "Do you think hell ran smoothly in your absence?"

Leviathan's expression darkens, but only for an instant. "No. It was irresponsible of me to stay away that long, and now I have to deal with the consequences." He traces my lips with his finger. "I don't know what I'm going to do, but I can't stay away from you."

"Really?" I ask, incredulous. "You're willing to leave your realm, your

responsibilities?”

“For you, Lia? In a heartbeat.” He smiles, his eyes full of love. “I have to get these things organized, and then maybe we can do six months in each place. Or meeting on weekends or something.”

I nod, looking around at his study. “Maybe I can help you. Where’s your computer?”

“Computer?” He arches an eyebrow.

“Mm.” I smile. “Maybe you do need a data engineer, after all. But first.” I throw a leg over his chair, straddling him. Two of his hands curl around my waist, pulling me closer, while the other two fondle my ass. “I have been reading a monster romance book.”

His eyes darken. “Have you now?”

I nod. “Yeah. And the monster had a knot, just like you.”

Levi swallows. “So?”

“So... Wouldn’t you like it... You know...” My face goes hot. Am I really about to ask this? “Wouldn’t you want to knot me?”

Before I say anything else, Leviathan lifts me effortlessly. My legs dangle around his waist, then he lays me down upon the thick rug in front of his bookshelf. I sink into it. Wow, this is a thick rug.

“I’m taking this as a yes .” I say, chuckling with nerves.

With a roar, Levi grabs onto my hips and kisses me. He drapes his hot body over

mine, needy and hot. His tongue dives into my mouth, claiming me desperately. He grinds his hard cock against my thigh.

“I want you forever, Cordelia Dallimore,” he growls against my mouth, his eyes smoldering with desire. “In every way possible.” He moves his hips, and a moan spills past my lips. “I want your body, your heart, and your soul. I want to make you my mate and keep you with me forever.”

With a snap of his fingers, our clothes disappear. I gasp, the warmth of the fire touching my exposed skin.

“Levi!” I cry out, grinning.

His teeth latch onto my pulse. There’s a hand on my tit, another in my hair. A third on my thigh, pushing it down. The fourth traces circles too close to my pussy, but not close enough.

“Sorry,” he whispers against the hollow of my throat. “I missed you so fucking much and you go on and say you want my knot. Fucking hell. I need it. I need to knot you right now.”

“Okay,” I reply, breathless, and then he’s claiming my mouth again.

Levi lowers between my legs, two hands spreading my knees, the other two pinching my nipples. I moan, arching off the rug. Pleasure sets every nerve-ending on fire. He latches onto my clit without wasting a second.

His talented tongue works me into an orgasm so fast it blows my mind. He doesn’t stop. Levi keeps lashing at my sensitive clit as he slowly inserts one finger, then a second. My hips move by themselves, bucking, begging for more. He inserts a third as I come apart again.

Levi rises on top of me, his face contorted in agony. “I need your pussy around me, love,” he says, breathless, my slick on his chin.

“Fuck me. Take me,” I plead.

With a growl of primal need, Leviathan enters me in one smooth, breathtaking motion. I gasp, my body stretching around his girth, electrical pleasure coursing through my veins. He’s right: this is where I belong.

“Gods, Lia,” he moans, kissing a trail down my neck as he begins to move, his hips grinding against mine. “You feel so good, so damn perfect.”

“Oh, Levi,” I moan, arching my back, meeting his every thrust with my own desperate need. I run my hands down his chest and up his arms, then I scratch down his back. “Don’t ever stop. I-I can’t... I...”

The world explodes around me as I come apart again. My toes curl. I can’t take it anymore. My nerves burn. Everywhere. I’m sensitive everywhere and he hasn’t even put his knot in me.

“Fuck, you come so good around me,” he says, his eyes on my face. “Think you can take it?”

I nod. “Please. Please.”

Levi pins my hips down with two hands. He wraps his third hand around my wrists, putting my hands over my head. I stretch with him, my breasts bouncing with his rocking. With his fourth hand, he works on my clit.

And I had no idea I could come again, but lust coils tight between my hips.

“ Oh .”

“Yes, love. That’s it.”

I climb toward a massive orgasm. I can feel it everywhere, down to my very toes. Clenching my jaw, I slam my eyes shut, focusing on the pleasure.

That’s when Levi pushes his knot into me. As I’m teetering on the edge.

It’s indescribable. The pain mixes with bliss. Discomfort and utter pleasure. He stretches me too far, and then my orgasm makes my muscles clench around him further. I cry out with the sudden invasion. Too big. He’s too big. And then I’m coming apart, squeezing his knot, and pure ecstasy runs through my veins like the purest drug.

“Oh, fucking hel—“ Levi starts, then cuts off, a deep, gravel-like grunt rising from his throat and transforming into a roar. He shakes against me, then comes. He pours himself inside me, hot and thick, and I drop off the edge once more.

I blank. There’s nothing. For a second, I think I’m dead.

Slowly, my consciousness comes back. We’re still frozen in the very same position. My leg has started to cramp. My pussy clenches with aftershocks. Levi is still inside me—hard, so hard, and so big it’s growing uncomfortable. Strangely, I don’t feel any of his come spilling down my inner thighs.

When I look down between us, my lower abdomen is...

“Holy shit, what the fuck?” I cry out.

He pulls back, glancing between us. He relaxes over me again. “Yeah,” he says, his

voice rasping as if he had been screaming. “The knot is a seal. It makes sense. The come has nowhere to go.”

“I look, like, five months pregnant.”

He makes a pleased sound. “Yeah. Yeah, you do.” Levi smiles and there’s such a loving look on his face that I can’t help but hope.

For a family of our own. For a future where we create our own story.

EPILOGUE

CORDELIA

One Year Later

Tiny shimmering orbs of light float through the air, casting a mesmerizing glow on the black stone walls adorned with intricate runic carvings. The vaulted ceilings of the Citadel's ballroom are covered in them, so when I look up, it looks like the most perfect night sky.

The scent of fireplace embers mingles with the jasmines Miranda brought. There's an orchestra of dead spirits in the corner. Demons and mortals and orcs and hundreds of other creatures from every realm mingle and laugh, their varied forms and features a dizzying kaleidoscope.

It's perfect. I never thought I'd get married, and Levi wanted me to have the best. Something simple but wistful and pretty. Otherworldly.

I spot Miranda deep in conversation with one of Levi's advisors, a towering demon with curling horns and fiery eyes. She nods thoughtfully as he gestures animatedly, no doubt regaling her with tales of demon history and lore. Miranda and Sylvia have come with me a few times this past year, and they always end up making new friends. I shake my head in amazement at how easily they accepted all of this—the underworld, the demons, my marriage to their king.

Levi stands between Miranda and me, his powerful frame tense with boredom despite

the festivities. He's in an elegant, shimmering black suit that goes so well with his red skin. I bite back a chuckle at Levi's attempts to play nice. The fearsome Demon King, making small talk. For me.

I search for Syl. Across the ballroom, demons of all sexes and forms flock around her, drawn to her magnetic energy and sultry smile. I sigh and take a sip of shimmering blue liquor. I tried to convince her not to seduce half of Levi's subjects tonight, to no avail. Every time she visits, she ends up with someone different. They're drawn to her like moths to flame.

I tug on Levi's hand. "Your throne awaits, my king," I tease with a smile.

He strides to the dais, pulling me onto his lap as he sits. His spicy scent fills my senses, and I relax against his solid chest.

Levi sighs. "You save me more often than you know," he whispers into my ear.

"Were you bored?"

"The thing about demon history is that I was there. I saw it all. I wrote the books. I know it all by heart and none of it interests me anymore." He presses his lips to my cheek. "I would listen to Marduk talking history for eternity if you wanted me to, though."

I laugh and he captures my lips in a searing kiss, his hand snaking into my hair. I melt into him, into the delicious pressure of his mouth, the slide of his tongue against mine. When his lips trail down my neck, I can't contain the breathy moan that escapes me.

Levi stiffens. He shifts me subtly, and then I feel his hand slipping beneath the slit in my gown, gliding up my thigh. I cross my legs to conceal it. My eyes flutter shut at

the sensation, electricity crackling through my veins. The ballroom full of demons fades away until there is only Levi—his touch igniting me, his fingers finding my core.

“No panties?” he whispers into my ear, his voice rasping. “Fuck, you’re so good to me, mate.”

He strokes me with maddening precision, teasing and circling until pleasure coils tightly in my core, until I’m trembling on the edge. The thrill of his brazen touch here, now, where anyone could see, sends equal jolts of arousal and exhilaration through me. I have to bite his shoulder to muffle my cry as his fingers drive me closer to ecstasy.

I shift in his lap, rubbing against the rigid evidence of his own desire. His soft growl reverberates through me.

“Stop teasing,” he says with a warning in his voice.

“Or what?” I meet his gaze as I clench my jaw, holding back from coming too soon.

Levi stops. I almost whine, but there’s no time.

His hands are on my hips, and then he throws me over his shoulder as he shoots to his feet.

Cheers and howls fill the ballroom, but I’m laughing too hard to care as my husband, the mighty Demon King, carries me off to ravish me properly. Here in his dark kingdom of magic and shadows, I have finally found where I belong.

EPILOGUE

LEVIATHAN

Ten Years Later

S unlight filters through the golden trees outside our bedroom window, casting dappled shadows across the rumpled sheets. Cordelia lies sprawled before me, her curves lush and inviting. Not a day of age shows on her rosy skin even after ten years. It's as if we're frozen in time together.

Or it would seem if it weren't for her growing belly.

My hands glide over her hips, relishing the silky softness. I caress her swollen stomach where our baby grows, then lower. Cordelia parts her thighs, welcoming me into the slick heat between.

Perfect. She's perfect.

Kneeling between her knees, I slide home with a groan, her tight cunt enveloping me down to my knot. I savor the exquisite pressure, the clench and flutter of her inner walls massaging my length.

Cordelia sighs, bliss coloring her face. Her golden hair spills across the pillows as she arches up to meet my thrusts.

I set a deep, rolling rhythm, my grip tightening on her generous hips. Plunging into

her again and again. Cordelia's breasts bounce enticingly with each impact, the dusky nipples pebbled, begging for attention. I thumb the sensitive tips until she's mewling for me.

"Yes, right there," she pants, clutching at the sheets. Her moans take on a desperate edge, climbing in pitch. I know the telltale signs by now—the hectic flush coloring her cheeks, the tremors running through her plump thighs. She's on the brink.

I'm hungry to feel her unravel on my cock, greedy for the spasms of her release milking me. Pivoting my hips, I grind against her most sensitive spot.

"Oh god, I'm going—I'm—" A cry rips from Cordelia's throat as the orgasm crashes over her. Her inner walls ripple and clench, the pulsing heat triggering my own peak.

Pleasure detonates down my spine as I slam into her one last time. Pulling out, I fist my throbbing shaft, angling it towards her face.

"Open your mouth, love."

Cordelia's eyes gleam with desire, her pink lips parting obediently, her tongue sticking out. I groan her name like a prayer as ecstasy shatters through me. Thick ropes of hot come paint her breasts, her round belly, and splatter across her waiting tongue. She swallows every drop eagerly, humming in delight.

I collapse beside her, gathering my mate close. With a flick of my fingers, she's clean again. "Maybe that's what keeps you so young and beautiful," I muse, stroking a possessive hand over her stomach. "Drinking my come."

Cordelia grins impishly, nuzzling into my neck. "Guess that means I'll have to keep drinking it then."

"As much as you want, whenever you want." I press a kiss to her temple, my chest

squeezing.

This woman. This woman has all of me. Forever. I never imagined creating a life, a family. Before Cordelia came into my world, the very notion would have made me laugh.

Me? A family man? Never.

Now, with her in my arms, our child growing inside her... I would raze cities to ash to protect this. To keep her smiling, safe, and sated. My mate's happiness is all that matters. I would burn the world to see her eyes light up.

And I'll spend every day proving it, worshipping her body and soul, for the rest of our immortal lives. However long that may be.

Thank you so much for reading Knotty Bargain!

If you enjoyed it, please, leave a review!