



Raising the Sun (Tales from the Tarot)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Isaac Miller is a failure—in business and life—but he'll be damned if he asks for help. When his older brother sends him to an occult shop of all things, the cryptic man behind the counter offers up a spell that'll supposedly lead him down the path of success. Isaac doesn't believe in magic, but when the incantation causes a demon to show up in his bedroom through a puff of smoke, he may have to reassess his beliefs.

The beautiful yet arrogant menace holds the key to all of Isaac's desires, but apparently, the morally grey don't work for free.

Amadeus, 'Ash,' is growing weary of his usual mischief and mayhem, and is in need of some thrilling venture to sink his fangs into. When he finds himself summoned to the human realm by a delightfully desperate florist, it's as if fate has dropped an entertaining new endeavour into his lap. Luring the innocent man into his bed would be one way to cure his boredom, so what's the harm in pretending it's part of the deal?

What Ash doesn't expect is to feel compelled to heal the defeated creature, and discover that doing so might just fill the void in his soul.

Could this accidental summoning turn into the perfect arrangement? Or is the road to happiness paved with malicious intentions and wilted blooms? There's one way to find out.

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AMADEUS

O rgy or ritual sacrifice? That was the question. More to the point, which of my usual vices would cure the boredom that had settled in my blackened soul today? Neither, probably. At least, not for long. But another hour spent draped across my ornamental throne, waiting for entertainment to fall graciously into my lap, would absolutely have me withering to dust. In the past week alone, I'd almost wrung out both options—and many worthy others—to the point of stripping them of all novelty, but I was nothing if not a creature of habit.

Inane repetition was but one consequence of the life I led, after all.

Being the youngest son of a viscount had its perks. My existence was lavish, rich, and I could spend my days drinking, fucking, and causing chaos without so much as a sneer in my direction.

I wasn't needed. The 'heir and the spare' was a concept that had long since outgrown our family, and those eleven brothers and sisters ahead of me in line granted me a freedom that not many others of my station could afford. I was left to my own devices. Whatever I chose to do with my endless spare time was irrelevant. I was ignored. Forgotten. I could have everything I wanted. From jewels to jesters, I had it all.

And yet...

Two hundred and thirty-two years was long enough for me to have tired of the possibilities. I'd run every diversion into the ground, taken advantage of every

indulgence my freedom offered, and it wasn't enough. Between the monotony and my dwindling imagination, I was missing something. There was a hole in me that no amount of blood, spirits, or orgasms seemed to fill. Not anymore. I craved something fresh to sink my fangs into, something that would satisfy the hollowness—if only to be rid of its incessant ache—while also feeding my desire for amusement.

I just had no clue what , and the longer I had to sit there, lamenting my misfortune, the more keenly I felt the loss.

A vicious cycle.

Wilting like a flower deprived of sunlight, I let out a disgruntled huff and sank further into my throne. Well, more an oversized chair sculpted from pure platinum, marbled with striations of gold and tiger's eye, but for the sake of simplicity, 'throne' worked well enough.

“What have I done to deserve such a cursed fate?”

The question echoed through the vacant halls, the silence that followed stretching for a beat before an answering whine drifted up from the floor.

Oh .

I'd quite forgotten I had company.

With a pout, I let my head loll to the side to better address the soul kneeling obediently at my feet. “That was rhetorical, you wretched thing,” I cooed, laughing at its hissing chirp of apology—manners weren't entirely absent, then. “Though, I suppose, if you have any ideas for games you wish to play—” I raised a foot, sweeping the pads of my toes through the entity's ghostly torso, making it shiver. “—I'm all ears.”

The creature could only squirm and grunt, its ghoulish shape lacking a mouth or permission to move. Hollow eyes peered up at me, desperate and hopeful, and I knew exactly what it wanted.

“I tortured you only yesterday, you greedy thing. Wouldn’t want me to sicken myself of that too, now would we?” A quirk of my brow had it trilling in agreement but deflating. Admittedly, the prospect of making a shade scream would have piqued my interest had the sound not ingrained itself in my head and started to grate.

I truly was in a rut .

“No, what I seek is nothing less than the extraordinary. A skinny-dip into the unknown.” I leaned forward to flick a clawed finger in front of its face, drawing its gaze back to me. “Does your wicked little mind have any suggestions on that front?”

After a thoughtful pause, the creature shook its head, returning to silence. I sighed in disappointment and withdrew my touch, slumping back in my seat. “Pity.”

It was pointless to dwell on it. I was too young and too pretty to be developing worry wrinkles over such things or, sweet Tartarus forbid, dirtying my delicate hands with manual labour—torture excluded. If a solution to my predicament didn’t trip over itself to gain my attention, it wouldn’t happen at all. A shame for my sanity, certainly, but what was I to do?

I propped my head up with one hand, drumming my metal-claw-tipped fingers against the chair arm with the other. There was a restless urge blooming in me, making me want to fidget—an alien impulse. Why I’d decided that morning to forgo the comfort of my usual robe and don my full regalia wasn’t clear to me. Though, I suspected my past self had a perfectly reasonable explanation as I wasn’t in the habit of making stupid choices, but one had to wonder if the purpose had exhausted itself by now.

I was elegance personified, and that was reason enough for anything, but whether brought on by my aimless reflective spiral or the blistering light beaming in through the stained-glass windows, I was getting agitated. My skin itched like it was suddenly three sizes too small, feeling sweat-sticky and burdensome, and I wished to disrobe.

Orgy it is.

Hauling myself to my feet with a put-upon sigh, I clicked my fingers to summon the servant I knew lingered like a ghost in the shadows, but the unpleasant sensation intensified. I hummed in confusion as my attempt to take a step forward was unsuccessful, leaving me rooted to the spot.

Fire prickled like weak poison in my veins, the undercurrent of magic evident in its assault. The crease between my brows was an undesirable side effect as I pondered the invisible force keeping me immobile, but I had no time to draw a conclusion before my body began fading into the ether, feet first, the tingle turning almost painful.

Between one blink and the next, a vortex of smoke rose from the ground, my final warning before I felt it—a shift in the atmosphere that rocked my very being. The air grew thick, the fizz of electricity a constant thrum in my ears as all whispers of grandeur vanished.

I was no longer present in my own realm.

Fuck .

I looked down to find my body had, thankfully, returned to its original, solid state, though it took another breath or two for my senses to follow suit. The needling burn had vanished, at least. Small mercies. For a fleeting moment, I dared not move, not even to wiggle my fingers and stimulate blood flow. It wasn't out of fear, my

stillness, but to limit distractions as I got my bearings.

Why have I been dragged here of all places?

More than a few decades had passed since I'd paid the human realm a visit. An uneventful one, as I anticipated this would be, though it already felt different somehow. There was a tone to this summoning that I couldn't quite place, a sweeter and more enthralling note than the typical evil that accompanied these... events, and I considered myself intrigued.

How long that was to last, who could say? I waved a hand through the still billowing smoke, regardless, impatient to lay eyes on the human brave or foolish enough to perform a summons. Yet, once the dark fog had cleared, I was not faced with the crazed devil worshipper hoping for a taste of divinity I'd expected. Instead, it was a young, timid creature—with the most delicious aura of innocence—kneeling on a bed in the middle of an uninspiring, cluttered room, looking startled and confused.

My gaze landed on the binding circle at my feet, and a scowl was unavoidable. Now that wasn't something I had foreseen, and the primary response swelling in my gut wanted to be rage, but I snapped out of the unseemly emotion as something in me clicked. My earlier thoughts regarding entertainment falling into my lap now felt greatly prophetic. Or they would have, if not for the six feet of distance between me and my untainted host.

Though, with another appreciative glance at the creature and a determination born of pure, unadulterated boredom, came a realisation that the particulars may yet be arranged. And was that a long overdue thrill I felt in my bones? I did believe it was.

Tempting a virgin to ruin?

Much better than an orgy.

A smirk crawled onto my face, my blood thrumming, but before my forked tongue could curl around a verse of seduction, the pretty little pet found his voice, further captivating my interest—unintentionally, to be sure.

“Who the fuck are you?!”

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Chapter one

ISAAC

EARLIER THAT DAY

It was early. Too early to be out of bed and drinking burnt coffee because the only spot open at the arsecrack of dawn was the greasy service station cafe in the next town over. But, there I was, hands clasped around a chipped mug, listening to my brother whinge about his week, trying not to screw up my face with every mouthful.

It was rare that we could meet—every month or two, when our schedules aligned—so I had to lump it, sticky tables and all. Wayne had called me yesterday, harping on about how I distanced myself whenever I was struggling, and how getting me to socialise was impossible, so despite the ungodly hour, I was here, proving him wrong.

In actuality, I'd just been too busy running a business into the ground to stop and chat. Nothing personal, but still. Part of me knew I had to make more of an effort .

It really had been too damn long since I'd seen his cheery face.

“Have you signed up for the flower show yet?” he asked, taking a sip from his own cup, his eye twitching as he swallowed.

We were nothing alike in appearance. He was as broad as he was tall, his hair a dark brown, and he smiled more often. If it weren't for our matching nose freckles, and the

fact that we both had our mum's eyes, no one would ever peg us for brothers. It was a running joke between us that I'd come from the milkman.

"No, and I'm not going to." He was talking about the Flower Festival, a huge event held in our county every two years. It was the event for anyone even remotely into floriculture; a weekend filled with all things floral, and it was my favourite place on Earth.

Florists came from all over Britain to compete in the revered Sunday Show to prove their talent and attract new customers. I'd only ever taken part as a spectator, even with Wayne's constant insistence that I should enter. I'd have loved to. It had been a dream of mine since I was a kid, from the very first time our mum thought I was old enough to appreciate it and I'd watched the competition through awestruck eyes. But I wasn't ready.

He knew that.

Or at least he was aware that I knew that .

"Come on, Iz," he said, nudging my foot under the table like we were five. "It's been four years since you set up shop. I know you want to."

I scoffed, brushing my thumb along the rim of my mug. I couldn't bring myself to drink any more. "It has nothing to do with wanting ."

If it had, I'd have signed up years ago.

"You just need to have more confidence in your abilities."

"I'm confident that I'm not cut out for it," I said with a humourless laugh. "For any of it."

“Course you are.” He said it with conviction, setting his cup on the edge of the table. I guessed neither of us could stomach finishing the swill. “And besides, you don’t mean that. Otherwise, you’d have given up by now.”

I hummed. “That’s what Mum and Dad would want.”

It was spite that kept me from quitting, not confidence. It was one of the main reasons why I was closer to Wayne than my parents. Unlike them—my mother especially—he’d never once told me to give up the flower shop. He understood how much it meant to me, and he truly believed I was capable of showing everyone who doubted me that I could handle it. He offered his support, knowing that I wouldn’t take it because I was stubborn and thought accepting help would ruin my whole MO, but it was the principle. He didn’t force the easy way out.

He respected my decisions, however irresponsible, and I was grateful for it .

“They just worry about you, Iz,” he said, telling me what, deep down, I already knew. It was just hard to see it that way sometimes. “It’s not that they don’t think you’re good enough. You don’t open up, and all they see is their golden boy struggling and they can’t do anything about it except tell you there’s no shame in waving the white flag.”

“I know, I know. I just...” I scrubbed a hand over my face, already done with this conversation. “The constant negativity, even the good-natured kind, gets so fucking grating. I’m tough enough on myself, I don’t need it from outside sources, too.”

He nodded. “They do love you, though. I promise.”

“Yeah.” It wasn’t intentional, but the discomfort had my gaze drifting to the clock behind the counter, noticing with a start that I had forty minutes until my shop was due to open. We’d been there for an hour and a half already, and awful drinks aside, it

had felt more like ten minutes.

Huh .

I'd almost forgotten why our meetings weren't a regular thing.

Wayne huffed a laugh, drawing my attention back to him. "Look, I know you're chomping at the bit to get out of here..." He shot me a look when I tried to argue, forcing my mouth to clack shut. "But there was a reason other than missing your crabbit face why I wanted to meet up." He reclined in his seat to go fishing in his jeans pocket. "I have something for you."

"I swear to God, if it's another cheque—"

He snorted. "Fuck no. I learned my lesson the last time." I'd put it through my shredder, and had he produced another one, thinking it was safe in a public setting, he'd have been wrong. "No, some guy at work gave me an address, told me to check it out if I ever needed a bit of a boost. It made me think of you." Finally triumphant in the battle against his skintight jeans, he slid over a crumpled piece of paper, which I eyed sceptically. "Apparently, the guy behind the counter can help with whatever you need. No judgement."

Not suspicious at all. "I'm not interested in loan sharks," I deadpanned, before tacking on, "Or therapists."

"It's nothing like that, I swear." He smiled, shifty yet hopeful. "Just go and see. Trust me, it's nothing dodgy. I'd never put you in danger, Iz."

I trusted him with my life, but there was definitely something he wasn't telling me; some important detail that he seemed to be purposefully leaving out for whatever nefarious reason. Well, I wasn't indulging his whims today. "I deal with shit myself."

“And that’ll still be the case. This wouldn’t be an instant fix like money or whatever, but...” He flopped against the table, laying the pleading dramatics on thick. “Come on, mate, you’re up to your eyeballs, and you hardly ever seem truly happy anymore. It’s okay to need a little... lift.”

“I’m fine,” I lied, but there were no flies on my brother.

“Don’t bullshit me. I know you better than I know myself, and if you won’t let me help you outright, at least let me involve a third party.” It wasn’t exactly a request, but he did raise a hand as if pledging his honour. “And hey, if you go and decide it’s not for you, I’ll never mention it again. How’s that?”

“I seem to have given the impression this is up for negotiation. My mistake,” I said dryly, with a glare to match.

He shrugged, unbothered, still grinning like a fool. “Gotta do what I gotta do.”

After a beat, and no further response from me, his expression morphed into something soft and aware. I should have hated it, being caught under such an astute gaze, but from him, it didn’t feel quite so condescending. Probably because he was the only person qualified in interpreting my silences and drawing out my internal debates. He no doubt understood clearly that I was fighting with myself, between accepting what he offered because I knew he meant no harm, and sticking to my guns. He always knew, and it made everything that much easier.

“I’m your big brother...” He reached over to pat my hand in reassurance. “And all I want is to get you back to your bright, chirpy self—the you that started this business. That’s all.”

I could tell him no and he’d abandon it. I knew that. But something about the desperation in his eyes, even masked by amusement, made me feel a little

sympathetic to his efforts. He only ever had my best interests at heart and, I mean, he wasn't wrong. Even my pig-headed arse could admit that I'd lost a lot of my spark in the last few months, which must have been hard for him—as my big brother and closest friend—to watch .

I sighed.

I'd have felt the exact same in his shoes.

It was for that reason, and that reason alone, that I snatched up the paper, making absolutely no promises as I said, "I'll think about it."

I parked on the street, thirty feet from the address on the card.

Call me a bleeding heart, but Wayne would have been crushed if I hadn't, and since there were twenty minutes to spare until I had to be at work, and I was in the town anyway, why not humour him? For the sake of my eardrums, if nothing else.

Except, had I known more about this place—other than 'the guy behind the counter will help'— before pulling up, getting out of my car, and finding the shop entrance, I'd have told him to go fuck himself.

The red sign above the door read, The Magic Shop, and with an eye roll and a grumble of his name, I cursed my brother—probably the best place for it—for making fun of me. He knew my opinion on the supernatural, how I thought it was all a crock of shite, but that was probably why he hadn't given me any information. He'd kept it vague to get me to the door, and honestly, I should have guessed his 'offer' would involve something along these lines. Contrary to me, he loved anything occult, so I supposed I only had myself to blame.

Though, I'd be blaming him entirely whenever we spoke again. Bloody twat.

The shop's exterior wasn't all that impressive. Just a regular brick building with black wooden panelling, in the middle of a regular street, sandwiched between a charity shop and a newsagent. Nothing extraordinary. Though, the witchy window display gave it some charm—if you were into that sort of thing—and the black door was wedged open in invitation. There was also a smell coming from inside that reminded me a lot of my own shop. It was floral and sweet, but even squinting through the window, I couldn't see any flowers. I couldn't see much of anything except shadowed outlines in the dark. Had the door been shut, I'd have thought it was closed.

I could pretend it was, and leave, but it wouldn't surprise me if Wayne had the opening times memorised, or he was camped out in his car across the street, chuckling to himself at having finally tricked me over to the dark side. I had a quick glance just to be sure, but there was no one suspicious lurking around. There were empty cars parked at the side of the road, and a lamp post with a missing cat poster stuck to it, but that was about all I could see. No people, no hustle and bustle. It struck me as odd, but maybe it wasn't a particularly busy part of town?

I didn't live there, so how was I to know if the streets outside magic shops were usually popular or not ?

I was stalling, and after a look at my phone screen, I realised I was quickly running out of time. I could've just gone back to my car, driven home, and set up shop early, but I was already here, and despite there being no one to bear witness, I'd feel a right plum having lingered for so long only to turn back. So, with a deep sigh and a head shake at my own expense, I headed inside.

My eyes widened as soon as I stepped through the doorway.

The place was much larger than I'd expected, both wider and taller— brighter , too. The window must have been tinted. It appeared narrow from the outside, squashed

between two other shops as it was, and not nearly big enough to swing a cat. But along the walls were shelves upon shelves of dusty old books, with scary-tall ladders leading to the top rows that made my belly swoop just imagining standing on them. The proportions were way off, and there was natural light streaming in that couldn't possibly be coming from one window. None of it made sense. It had to be some sort of illusion: mirrors or the like warping reality and fucking with the customers' minds.

It definitely worked.

I made my way down one of the aisles, scanning the array of pretty crystals and other occult supplies I had no idea what to call, or what their uses might be. The floral smell was much more potent inside, but there were still no flowers that I could see. It was likely coming from the bunches of dried herbs dangling from the shelves, but that didn't seem quite right. The scent in my nose was fresh and vibrant, not earthy or stale. I ignored it, putting it down to more simple trickery, but it gave me the heebie-jeebies nonetheless.

At the end of the aisle, I came face to face with a counter: a till to one side and a call bell that said 'please ring for assistance' at the other. No one was manning the station, so I followed the instructions and tapped the button on the top. The chime echoed for a good few seconds—an ear-splitting sound that seemed to ricochet between every glass jar—before fading out with no one coming to answer its call. I turned to see if there were any staff milling around one of the other rows I hadn't walked down, but they were all just as empty.

Frowning, I turned back, intent on making my impatience known by ringing the bell again...

Only to damn near jump out of my skin, instead.

"Creeping Jesus!" My hand flew to my chest as I stumbled backwards, away from the

six-foot-tall man who'd appeared behind the till without a peep. "I didn't..." I took a deep inhale to be sure I hadn't shit myself, then exhaled with a prayer of gratitude that I hadn't. "I didn't expect you to be there."

The stranger's eery black eyes dropped to the bell before flicking back up. "You rang."

"Yeah, but..." I trailed off, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. He must have come from the door behind the till—a back room, probably—but I swore, I hadn't heard it open. What kind of fuckery had I wandered into? "Never mind."

The guy reminded me of the magician my brother had at his twelfth birthday party, clad in his bow tie, black suit complete with long jacket tails, and top hat. It was a fine line between tacky and distinguished. I mean, I couldn't exactly fault him for his commitment to the bit, but it seemed a little too well tailored to be entirely fancy dress.

Maybe he was just an avid fan of the Victorian era?

Isn't that the case for most people into this stuff?

He propped his hand against the counter's edge, lips curling into a polite smile. "How can I be of assistance?"

"I have no idea," I answered honestly, unsure how else to act. "My brother gave me your address, but I think it's some kind of prank 'cause—"

He cut me off, swatting at the air as if batting away the very notion. "I do not deal in pranks. Only spells, potions, tinctures, runes—anything of the magical persuasion—can be found in here." He tilted his head like a curious dog, a dog that could see right into my soul. "Is there anything specific you're in need of? A Tarot

reading, perhaps?”

“Er...” I said eloquently, every thought I’d ever had fleeing my head for a beat.

The shopkeeper seemed to notice my malfunction and hummed in sympathy, his eyes roving over the whole of me as if assessing. After a few moments and a click of his teeth, his gaze returned to mine, his smile widening. “I believe I know exactly what you need.”

That woke me up .

“If it’s a big pile o’ cash, then you’d be correct.”

He huffed a short laugh, shaking his head. “Please wait here for three ticks.”

With a twist of his wrist, a cane materialised from thin air—slid out from his sleeve, undoubtedly, but still a pretty impressive sleight of hand—before he disappeared into the back room, out of view. I released a slow breath, already baffled by the entire interaction and gagging to leave. But just as the thought of legging it came to me, literally three seconds later , the stranger returned, a small pouch and what looked like a playing card in his hand.

My brow furrowed.

“Here we are,” he announced, resting his cane against the worktop so he could spread the items out. There was a feather there, too, long and orangey-red like a flame. Fucked if I knew any bird with feathers like that. It had to be fake. “Before I hand this spell over to you, you must understand that once you commit, it cannot be undone.”

I hadn’t the heart to admit I had no clue what was happening, or that I wasn’t a believer. There was no benefit to ruining his act, or his fun, and the quicker it was

over, the sooner I could go home. “Sure, I understand,” I said, somewhat confidently. “Er, what exactly does it do?”

“It will guide you to all that you desire,” he said. Keeping it vague, of course, ’cause who needed details, anyway? “That is why you are here, is it not?”

I was here because of Wayne. Why I was still here remained to be seen.

“If you say so,” I muttered, taking the supplies when he handed them over. I wanted to stuff them into my pockets, but decided to wait until I was outside. “So, how much is this going to set me back, hm?”

The shopkeeper held up his hand, stopping me from digging out my wallet. “No payment is required today.”

My scepticism festered as I glanced over my shoulder once more, half expecting to see a shadow with an ancient scroll, demanding I sign my name on the dotted line. Nothing was free, so this whole rigmarole was either a scam to squeeze money out of me later—top contender in my opinion—or some black-market organ trade that I wanted no part of.

Still, despite my anxiety and my sweat-slicked palms, I couldn’t help but press on.

I was invested now.

“What does that mean?”

“Once a lesson is learned, the debt will be paid.”

“Once... What ?” I waited for him to elaborate. He did not, and a stilted laugh that bordered on manic burst from my throat.

Riddles. How fun.

The feather was an awkward length, and I tried my best not to crush it in my hand, I really did. “Well, thank you for the cigarette ash. Should all my dreams come true, I’ll be sure to leave you a review on yelp. ”

“Wait,” he called as I spun on my heel to leave.

The poor guy was just doing his job, and I felt the tiniest bit guilty for acting so irate, but all I could think about was how much I could’ve got done at the shop had I not come here. That wasn’t his fault though, so with a silent sigh, and a mental fuck you to my brother, I turned around.

“Yeah?”

The stranger reached into his jacket and brought out a folded piece of paper before passing it to me. “Here are the instructions,” he said, his expression serious. “Be sure to follow them to the letter.”

I forced a smile and took the note, adding it to the pile of stuff I’d probably never be looking at again. “Will do.”

“Good luck,” he said with a chivalrous tip of his hat, and on that note, I left, the door slamming closed behind me.

I flinched, but with my feet back on solid pavement, the recovery was quick. I examined my loot, noticing the sunflower on the face of the card for the first time. It was smiling, the words The Sun printed underneath—not a playing card, then. It had to be pure coincidence that a flower, my favourite flower, was staring up at me instead of any number of ‘sunny’ symbols, but after barely ten minutes in that shop, it was difficult to pretend it wasn’t also fucking creepy.

I scoffed and shoved the supplies into my pockets, deciding it was pointless to think about it anymore.

Waste of bloody time.

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Chapter two

ISAAC

Despite the state of business, my shop was where I felt most at home. It was mine . A haven that I'd built up from the four damp-riddled walls and bare floorboards it had once been. Seeing the script above the door, Miller's Meadow, with its thick garland of yellow and white artificial wisteria dangling over the frame never failed to make me smile. It was proof that I'd followed my dreams, that I'd ignored the whisperings of the peanut gallery and actually accomplished what I'd set out to do, and it was something to be proud of.

But the feeling was brief, only lasting until I remembered it was all superficial. That the mess I'd dug myself into was hidden beneath that fancy sign and the whimsical window decor. My face fell. This place was the best thing in my life and the bane of my entire existence. It made me want to get up every morning, but also wish I hadn't. There was a constant battle in my head between satisfaction and defeat, knowing I'd worked my arse off to have everything I'd ever wanted, but was forced to watch it slowly be snatched out from under me.

I'd started this business because creating art through flowers was several degrees of rewarding. It felt good knowing my work gave people even just a couple of days of joy, and made them smile through the good, the bad, and the ugly of whatever life threw their way. A bunch of flowers added a ray of sunshine to any occasion; they were eye-catching, they had meaning , they were special, and having the ability to show that to the world felt like a gift that I couldn't take for granted.

But over the last several months, it had gotten harder and harder to hang on to those ideals, and bringing happiness to others when I struggled to find any for myself had gradually taken its toll. I'd thought pursuing floristry was a way for me to not only do something purposeful but also have a career that didn't feel like a chore. It was my dream, so it made sense to make it my everything . It still was, but I couldn't deny that the endless loop of disaster and toil had sucked out a lot of the fun.

There were only so many setbacks one person could smile through before dejection became the default.

A sharp meow at my feet stilled my thoughts, and I peered down to see Moxie, the neighbour's cat, weaving herself around my ankles and purring like her life depended on it. She was a regular: a chubby black moggy with the sweetest temperament, who treated this place as her second home. I didn't know how she managed it, but sometimes she snuck her way through the shop and I'd find her in the flat, curled up on my bed when I came home. I must've disturbed her plans. Either that or she'd sacrificed stealth in favour of the dish of milk I often put out for her.

Well, at least I'll always have one customer.

I snorted, crouching to scratch her chin before unlocking the door. The bell above my head jingled as I walked inside, and the familiar scent of sweet earthiness was first to hit me, followed closely by the chill. It had to be cold to keep the flowers thriving, and after a customary shiver and a second to reacclimatise, it was easy enough to ignore. Wearing a woollen jumper helped, too.

The room itself was small, but I'd made do. The owner of the building had given me free rein with the decor, and a discount on rent since it had been in such a state of disrepair. He was a decent guy, never had any complaints, and he just seemed grateful to have someone occupying the place after it had been empty for so long. In the beginning, I'd taken out a small loan to get me started, using most of it to spruce

things up and turn a derelict corner shop into a florist's I was chuffed to own.

More could probably have been done, but with such a modest budget, it wasn't too shabby. The walls were white and the carpets grey to keep the space as open and airy as possible. There was one tall window with a display nook beside the door, and the current showpiece was a peacock made from artificial flowers and gems. Drapes of fabric were bunched around its feet, and lights hung above its head to illuminate the pretty array of colours. It had gotten a lot of compliments.

Mostly because it had been up there for so long.

The large, three-tiered oval stand in the middle of the room was the main event. It was where the flowers sat in buckets on full display—greenery around the bottom, taller blooms in the middle, and everything else on top. It was high enough to be impressive, but still allowed me to reach every flower without stretching onto my tiptoes. I couldn't say the same for the shelves along the walls—they needed a stepping stool if anyone wanted the candles, picture frames, or cute little ornaments that lined them.

Not that they ever did.

At the back of the room was the counter, with the till sitting to one side, and a wooden frame of celebration cards angled at the other, collecting dust. It was where I tended to do most of my arrangements as it let me work and watch the people strolling past without so much as a curious glance in—clearly, I was a glutton for punishment.

Behind the bench was an archway that led to a smaller room, closed off from the public. It was my break room, mostly, or where I worked after hours. Nothing special, just a small cubicle in the corner with a toilet and a sink, and two wooden workbenches lining the walls. It was where I kept spare buckets and any

supplies—ribbons, floral foam, stands—that I didn't want cluttering up the shop floor. Wasn't as if there'd be much room for them, anyway .

Another meow , somehow more impatient than the last, demanded my full attention yet again. Could a man no longer appreciate his surroundings and lament his misfortunes in peace?

Hell's teeth.

“Alright, you greedy little thing,” I said, stepping over her to dump the spell ingredients on one of the workbenches before fetching a carton of kitty milk from the mini fridge in the corner. There was a small dish already washed out after her last visit, so I poured just enough to fill the bottom and set it on the floor, giving her a cursory pet as she got stuck in.

Leaving her to it and deciding I'd already wasted enough of my morning, I tugged on my apron, more than ready to forget about the whole interaction at The Magic Shop, and actually make my living. Last night, I'd received a last-minute order for pick-up today before closing, and though I had eight hours to perfect it, I had nothing else on my books, so was eager to start.

It was for a seventieth birthday party. Three centrepieces with sweet avalanche roses, gyp, and laurel—a simple arrangement that was so popular I had it listed as a specialty on my website. No matter how many times it was asked for, I always loved doing it. I could lose myself in the motions as easily as brushing my teeth, my fingers moving of their own accord without much direction. It was peaceful, a waltz, and whether sliding stems into the crunchy floral foam, peeling off excess leaves, or snipping the ends of stalks, it felt incredibly therapeutic .

By the time I finished up, a few hours after lunch, it was as if only minutes had passed. There had been no interruptions from needy cats, no setbacks, no stray self-

deprecating thoughts, just me getting lost in the art, basking in the reminder of exactly why floristry was my sole passion.

Stepping back to admire my work wasn't as much of a necessary evil as it sometimes felt. Not to toot my own horn, but the arrangement looked beautiful, elegant, and fresh. The pink blush on the roses nestled nicely among clusters of tiny star-like florets and stalks of rounded blue-green leaves. It was the same as always, a combination I'd put together a hundred times, but somehow, the placement of each flower looked especially perfect today.

I, for one, would be pleased as punch if I got them for my birthday. I only hoped the customer thought so, too.

There wasn't much else for me to do, except wait for their arrival and potter around doing some housekeeping. Two people popped in within an hour of each other for bouquets—one for their father's graveside and the other for a friend's baby shower—but besides that, it was just another slow day. It wasn't until ten minutes to closing, while I stood by the door spraying the flowers with water, that a middle-aged woman walked in, dressed in a purple suit and with a bright grin plastered over her face.

"Hello there," she said, her mouth and brows twisting into a bit of a wince. "Sorry I'm so late. Traffic was a nightmare."

"Don't worry! We're still open." I set down my sprayer and dried my hands on the hem of my apron. "Order for Melissa Johnson?"

"That's me!" The energy she gave off was infectious. It was obvious to anyone that she was excited—for the flowers or the party, I couldn't say, but it felt easy to mirror her smile. "Well, they're for Mum, but yes."

“Perfect! Follow me.” I led her over to the counter—where the three arrangements had sat all afternoon—and did a weird little hand-flourish in their direction. I scrubbed the back of my neck and cringed almost immediately afterward. “Here you go. If you want to just check them over, make sure everything’s dandy, then I’ll give you a hand to your car.”

She smiled in thanks, and stepped closer to study the arrangements, but after barely a tick, her keen expression began to fade. “What are those?”

I looked where she pointed, trying my best to pretend my heart hadn’t just collapsed straight to my arse from the abrupt shift in mood. “The... roses?” She nodded. “Oh, they’re sweet avalanches. Beautiful, aren’t they? They smell even better—”

“They’re dead.”

“No, they’re...” I blinked, my brow furrowing. “They were delivered fresh yesterday.”

“Look at the state of them,” she snapped, making me flinch as she plucked a petal from one of the blooms and held it up. “They’re withering at the edges! I’m sorry, but I didn’t pay all that money for dead flowers. ”

Ah.

Dejection settled on my shoulders like a lead weight.

She wasn’t exactly wrong, they did have a slight tinge to them, but that was the style of the rose. The petals were green at the tips, and faintly crinkled, but that added to their appeal and uniqueness. She clearly didn’t agree—and hadn’t done an ounce of research—and it was obvious from her tone that nothing would appease her.

I tried anyway.

“The roses do have an antique look to them, but that’s just how they are,” I explained, keeping my voice gentle and apologetic, even though retaliation would’ve felt more natural. “I’m sorry, I thought you were aware of that when you placed the order as there are pictures on my website, but I should have double-checked. Would you like me to replace them? I have other pink roses.”

“It’s too late now. The party is in thirty minutes.” The woman sighed, still very visibly frustrated, but clearly trying to reel in her outburst. She just looked as gutted as I felt. “I’ll have to take them and hope my mother doesn’t notice.”

Any flicker of enthusiasm or confidence I had felt before melted away, leaving only indifference and self-doubt. “I’ll go ahead and refund you fifty percent, since the order did not meet your expectations.”

She scoffed. “I should bloody well hope so.”

There was no point arguing. She wasn’t willing to listen, or believe me— me , the fucking florist—and I just wanted the whole exchange done with so I could go upstairs and wallow. Well, what I really wanted was to tell her where to shove the roses until they actually were dead, but it would serve no other purpose than a short-lived moment of satisfaction and giving her more ammo to use against me. One day, it would be worth it to lash out and tell a customer like her where to go, but today was not that day. Too much was at stake, so I’d suck it up and handle it with grace.

And a shite tonne of Ben & Jerry’s in bed, later.

Refunding her card was a blur. I spaced out, working on autopilot even while helping her cart the pieces to her boot. No more words were exchanged, but I could already imagine the crappy review she’d probably post in a day or two—if she waited that

long.

I locked the door once she'd driven away, flipping the sign to Closed before meandering into the back room to take off my apron. There was a stool under one of the workbenches that I tugged out with my foot, a landing pad for my slumping body. My head dropped onto the counter, and I sat there for Christ knew how long, just taking a minute to breathe before heading upstairs.

What the fuck was I doing? It was like freewheeling down a hill with no brakes, knowing that what awaited me was absolute carnage but being unable to stop. At this point, it could almost be labelled self-sabotage. I had the option to jump out of the car, give up, and take a fraction of the damage, but no. I chose to hold on, to see it through to the bitter end, just in case, like the stubborn fucking idiot I was.

It was surprising I still had any faith left, all things considered. Or maybe I just knew I wouldn't be content until everything had gone up in smoke, because at least I'd be certain it was over and nothing else could be done.

Rolling my head to the side, I clocked the spell supplies within arm's reach, taunting me. They were where I'd left them, but it felt as though they'd moved to purposely catch my eye. I picked up the fiery-orange feather, twisting it between my fingers, wondering what type of bird it came from and what significance it possibly held.

I knew nothing about spells or Tarot, except what I'd picked up from whatever Wayne yapped on about, but even then, I rarely listened. No shade to the believers, but it wasn't my jam, which was why I hadn't bothered popping back to ask the shopkeeper what The Sun card actually meant. Plus, I'd wanted away from there, sharpish. I could research it. Not that it would make a difference to my opinion, but part of me was slightly intrigued. Like whenever I read my daily horoscope in the paper. As with everything else in this vein, I thought it was a sham, but I'd still flick to the back page and find myself nodding along to every word if they even slightly

matched my circumstances.

“ You’ll experience a major complication, but there’s a solution at your fingertips. ”

Hm, perhaps they’d been onto something with that one.

Fuck it. I grabbed my keys and the items before rushing up to my flat. Let it be understood that eagerness wasn’t my guide, it was more that when curiosity had its claws in me, it was better for everyone involved to sate it quickly so I could move on. Left unchecked, it’d fester and grow, stick to me like a leech, and ensure I got nothing done.

There was no space for that kind of unproductivity.

My laptop was in my room, so I threw the card, feather, and ash pouch onto my bed, before flinging myself down with the device in my lap and opening my browser to click on the search bar. It took seconds, even with my bogus Wi-Fi, to bring up page after page of results for ‘sun card tarot meaning.’ Since I was no expert, I chose the first interpretation, then skimmed through the wall of text.

At first glance, it was obvious that the card was considered positive, which was good, I supposed. The grinning sunflower on the front probably should have clued me in to that, but it was also pretty creepy, so it was best to consult the specialists on such things. The theme of the page screamed warm energy and happiness, with the bold-lettered words ‘self-confidence,’ ‘contentment,’ and ‘success’ recurring throughout.

“Success,” I muttered aloud. “That wouldn’t go amiss.”

Another scan hailed much of the same: phrases repeated over and over, complete with little doodles of sunny things just to drive the point home. I’d gotten my answer. The card was everything I lacked in life, so the shopkeeper was obviously a psychic,

among other things, and hadn't been too far off with his analysis of my needs.

Or I was just that pathetic and wore my misery so obviously that he'd taken an educated guess.

I huffed a humourless laugh, ready to close down the site, get undressed, and find a show or movie to watch as a distraction. It was a day for repeats, I thought. But as my cursor hovered over the little red X, a pop-up appeared on screen, making me hesitate.

“ He will guide you through your struggles, resurrect that which you have lost, and help you on the path to success. ”

There it was again— success —the word that played on a loop in my head, but who the hell was ‘he?’ Did it mean the sun? A higher power? I had no fucking clue, but it was jarring enough to have me chewing my bottom lip and peering over my laptop at the ingredients strewn across the bed.

Was I seriously still dignifying this with attention?

It was a scam, that much was obvious, and I expected the only outcome to be me needing to Hoover the carpet tomorrow—or in three days, when it was due to be done—but I had nothing better going on with my evening. Maybe it was the trials of the day, the pain from losing money still a raw wound in my chest, but for some reason, exploring this felt marginally more appealing than sitting with my face in a tub of Ben & Jerry's, and making myself cry with sad movies. Well, the ice cream was getting scrapped, regardless, but if the crying could be delayed, I was all in .

The ingredients were bound for the bin, anyway. May as well make use of them once, either for curiosity's sake or for something to talk to Wayne about when I was ripping him a new asshole for sending me on this fool's errand to begin with.

Setting my laptop aside, I slid off the bed with the supplies and instructions gathered in my hands. A few piles of clothes had to be kicked out of the way to make enough room for the proceedings before I knelt on the floor. The directions were simple: place the card down flat (be sure the sunflower is facing the correct way up from where you are going to stand), set the feather on top, sprinkle the ash in a circle (roughly the circumference of a truck tyre), then clearly speak the incantation, word for word.

Easy-peasy .

I followed each step, the circle not as neat as the magic man had probably envisioned, but it would have to suffice. Or not, I didn't care. This was already getting more energy from me than it deserved, and I wasn't even finished yet. Thankfully, all there was left to do was stand at the edge, outside the circle—which I did, clumsily—and read the script. It wasn't a complex spell. A weird one, sure, but after silently mouthing each line to familiarise myself just in case any stuttering ruined the supposed effects, I took a deep, steadying breath and repeated the poetic words aloud.

Nothing happened .

I frowned, and despite myself, there was actually a hint of disappointment welling in my gut. Had part of me, the really desperate part, hoped a miracle would materialise like a shooting star in front of my eyes? Or was I purely pissed off about the thirty seconds I'd wasted, which could've been spent shovelling ice cream into my gob instead?

I scanned the page, to be sure I hadn't fucked up the incantation by missing a word or skipping a line. Nothing stood out, and with a quick double-take at my feet, I was certain I'd done everything else right. The placement of the items was correct, and the circle, bar the wonkiness, was still a damned circle. The spell just hadn't fucking worked.

Of course it hasn't, you colossal dipshit.

With a scoff, I crumpled the page in my fist before I threw it on the floor amongst the other rubbish. "Magic Shop? More like a fucking joke shop."

I stared at the ceiling above my bed, where I'd been lying for an hour willing myself to just drift off. My mind was busy, as was typical, but tonight there was an added edge of despair that wouldn't budge. It always happened after an order went pear-shaped. It made the feeling of failure increase tenfold, and the voices in the back of my mind grow louder and more condescending. They told me there was no shame in giving up, that not everyone was cut out to run their own business—least of all me—and it was harder than it once had been to pretend they were wrong.

No matter what I did, it was as if I were destined to hit a snag at every turn. Hurdle after hurdle that most people would call 'character building,' but I saw as a fat fucking joke at my expense. Was it the universe agreeing with everyone else and sending me signs to pack up and move on? Or was I really that incompetent? I would have put it down to luck—or lack thereof—but I wasn't much of a believer in that, either. People made their own luck through hard work and determination.

I obviously just hadn't reached that quota.

With a huff, I shifted, burrowing further into my duvet burrito, making sure my feet were tucked in for that extra bubble of comfort. It took everything in me not to pick up my phone and doom-scroll the internet, to distract myself from sinking too far into my self-pity session, but that would do the opposite of help. Next thing I'd know, it'd be dawn and my alarm would be ringing for work, and there was only one thing worse than going downstairs to wait around all day for customers that never came—doing the same thing with no sleep.

Hard pass on that one.

I shut my eyes, forcing different, non-work-related scenarios into my head, hoping something would click. But just as I felt the edges of my consciousness slip away, there came a roaring whoosh , a sound so unnatural that it made all the hair on my body stand on end. It was also the warning bell for the flames that followed, erupting like a torch doused in petrol at the bottom of my bed, sucking all the air out of the room.

Jerking upright, I scrambled to my hands and knees, pulse quick and fear overriding my senses.

Had a socket blown?

Had I plugged too many chargers into my extension?

My arms prickled with goosebumps as a tingle of something unfamiliar rolled over my skin, tense and heavy, and a curtain of smog replaced the fire. “What the...?”

There was a soft tinkling sound before a bejewelled hand—wrist adorned in bangles, and long fingers tipped with silver claw-shaped cuffs—swiped through the smoke as if dismissing a pest. The raging cloud dissipated to reveal its master: a tall, ginger-haired man with a lean figure, swathed in silks and veils of other lavish fabrics, now standing in the centre of the magic circle.

The gazelle-like black horns curving up from the top of his head were a little disconcerting, but could very well be a trick of the sleep-deprived variety. Or a headband, given all of his other decorations. Either way, I hadn’t the chance to scrutinise it as the stranger’s oval, muted-orange eyes pinned me with a hooded stare. Thick lashes fanned out from black liner, winged and catlike, and for a split second his pupils flared as bright as fire, making me gasp, before they flicked to his feet and narrowed in what looked like accusation .

My heart pounded in my throat as that piercing gaze returned to rake over me, arrogant yet sultry, and when our eyes met again, a wicked smirk spread across his face.

He parted his lips to speak, but, ever the master of impeccable timing, I beat him to it. Manners, given the circumstances, could go to hell.

“Who the fuck are you?!”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:27 pm

Chapter three

AMADEUS

How adorable .

Undeterred by the interruption, I allowed my grin to widen, revealing my fangs. The human's breath hitched. "You summoned me , pet. I should be the one asking questions."

My initial reaction to being summoned had bordered on murderous, not only because of the forced submission issue, but because travelling through the planes never failed to do a number on my hair. Though, that feeling seemed to lessen the more details I absorbed.

Those soft cheeks and charming freckles .

It had occurred to me, albeit briefly, to reach into the human's chest and yank out his heart, but I'd since calmed down. It wouldn't do to act hastily in such a complex situation, and it would've been such a waste. Yes, he'd tied my soul to his, effectively anchoring me to his realm, which was not ideal, but the pretty creature reeked of sadness and desperation, a truly heady cocktail that could prove very pleasing to exploit.

And oh, how I wanted to.

It wasn't quite the direction I'd imagined for my foreseeable future, but despite the

inconvenience of being ripped from my manor, there could yet be some fun in this little venture. I supposed it was the ‘something different’ I’d wished for, a wrench in my otherwise dull routine, and it wasn’t as if I were engaged in anything else.

Or really had a choice .

“Are you a genie?”

Fear made for a chatty little thing, it seemed. “No, I’m a demon. That was what you expected, was it not?”

He blinked up at me, confused. “I didn’t expect anyone, if I’m being honest.”

I studied the uneven circle of bone ash that had conjured me, and with a snap of my fingers the card and phoenix feather appeared in my open palm.

The human flinched.

“Who gave you this spell?” I asked, twirling the feather between my fingers before bringing it to my nose.

Yes, it was one of mine.

How is that possible?

I turned the card over, checking for a symbol or signature to reveal its origin. There was nothing but the sunflower on the front that mocked me with its cheer, though that was hardly a decal of its owner. Only a powerful entity could cast a binding spell, especially on someone of my station. The human was no such being, but whoever had given him the instructions and ingredients obviously was. They clearly also had an ulterior motive, since they’d stolen one of my own feathers—without my

knowledge—to bring me here, specifically.

Now, I could have dug through a mental list of everyone I'd ever pissed off to work out who would be so bold as to seek revenge, but that would take centuries.

The human telling me their name would be much quicker.

“What are you?”

Or not.

“I already—” I exhaled deeply and plastered on a polite smile. “I’m a demon with phoenix blood. Who gave—”

“Aren’t those birds?” His eyes flicked briefly to my horns, clearly puzzled by their presence. Fair, given the fact that his assumption was correct.

“I can take a bird form, yes, but that isn’t import—”

“Birds don’t have horns.”

I dismissed the items in my hands so I could massage my temples. Was this creature really worth the wrinkles he’d undoubtedly give me? “This one does,” I said, curtly. “Now, if you’ll just let me—”

“Why are you here?”

My patience had waned.

I pointed aggressively at the circle. “Because you summoned me, you foolish creature! ”

“No, I...” He trailed off as he stared at the evidence, and after a frankly ridiculously long pause, realisation finally dawned.

Thank Hades.

He threw up his hands. “Okay, to be fair, I was told it would bring me success, not a demon, so I don’t think I’m at fault here.”

“You want riches?” I offered dryly, infinitely unimpressed. Was that seriously what my life had come to? A cash cow for the ignorant and downtrodden?

Dull .

The human shrugged. “I mean, it would delay my business going down the pan, so yeah. Would be nice.”

“Well, I cannot give you riches. But since I’m here and I cannot leave, I can aid in your success and contentment, which may lead to wealth. If that is the path destined for you, of course.”

The human perked up at that, and I couldn’t deny that the way his eyes lit up with a little sparkle of hope kick-started a new addiction for me. “Really?”

“I’m sensing you do not understand the significance of what you have done.”

His shoulders slumped and he scrubbed at the cropped hair above his nape. “Shit. Will I have to sell you my firstborn? Is that what the shop guy meant by ‘learning a lesson?’”

Lesson? Interesting. I would have to revisit that later. “You must give me something,” I said as I admired my armoured fingertips, feigning nonchalance. “But

not a child. ”

“What, then?”

I flicked my gaze to his, lips curling back into the smirk that had wavered during the drivel. Time for the real fun to begin.

“Your seed.”

“My what ?! I have to—” He made a crude gesture that may or may not have been an indication of sex as he floundered like a.... well, a virgin. It was delightful. “I’ve changed my mind. You can go back from whence you came or whatever. I don’t need you.”

“I do not please you?” I pouted. I wasn’t familiar with being rejected, though from the way the human’s eyes couldn’t seem to stop roaming over me, that streak, mercifully, wouldn’t be ending now. “I could send for another, but it will cost extra.”

I couldn’t, actually. Not without expending a level of power that I had no possession of right then, especially since he had already piqued my curiosity, but he didn’t need to know that.

In his head, he could be in charge for a little longer.

“Huh?” His eyes snapped up from where they’d been lingering on my legs. “No! I mean, you’re gorgeous, but I don’t want to use you like that.”

“It would be no hardship, I assure you,” I purred, making his pale cheeks flush a pretty pink. “Besides, I am a demon. Morals are not really my forte.”

“Still. If I’d known...”

Persuasion, it seemed, might prove trickier than I had anticipated. Ah, well, I do so relish a challenge.

And I had the time .

“Regardless, you have used a binding ritual. I am to be tethered to your side until the day you die or until your needs are fulfilled.” I released an aggrieved sigh, though it was all for show. “Whichever comes first is entirely your decision.”

“Shitting hell. None of that was in the fine print.”

As he indulged in a momentary malfunction, stuttering about ‘cryptic fucking wizards’ and ‘stupid joke shops,’ I took in more of the room. There wasn’t much of it, or anything truly noteworthy to comment on, but it was enlightening, all the same. Interior design hadn’t improved since my last visit, that was obvious. The human obsession with beige truly was a mystery.

“Wait...” he said, and I turned back to him, gesturing for him to carry on. “What if I don’t pay? No transaction, no sex, no binding magic or whatever. You’ll be free to go, right?”

“The ritual is a contract,” I said clearly. “It is a soul bind , but its only purpose is summoning me here and tying me to you until death us do part, or the fulfilment of your greatest desire. Nothing more. We may have been forced together, but that does not mean I am obligated to help you. That part is totally at my discretion.”

I swept out my arms, grinning wide at his confused stare, before adding, “I am a demon, pet. I do not work for free, and I get to choose the price for my time. If you don’t pay, you won’t get the benefits my presence brings, but I’ll still be here—a shadow of no use, hanging over you until you wither away and I’m free to go. ”

He frowned. “So, what you’re saying is... the sex isn’t actually a necessity? You’re just taking something for yourself?”

“Exactly! See, I knew you were a clever boy,” I cooed, chuckling at the blank stare he levelled me with in return. “Look, at least I’m offering an alternative. Not many would be so generous. I could just let you die.” Or kill you myself . “Of course there’s the option of helping you without payment—out of the goodness of my heart, as they say—but why should I? You summoned me against my will, and my time is very precious to me.”

The delightful creature visibly reeled at that, opening his mouth, presumably to argue, only to have second thoughts. “Okay, that’s kinda fair, but couldn’t you have picked something else? Like a foot massage. Or... a gift card.”

“My magic is more potent when it’s fed by the fuel it recognises, my dear. And more potency means your dreams will come true quicker and I can leave you on your lonesome.”

“And what? Sex is the only fuel it recognises?”

“That or blood,” I responded airily, giving him a second to be horrified. “But a little creature like you? I’d have to drain you dry, so... sex it is.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

While his grumbling huffs were cute, this whole interaction was growing tedious. I loathed explaining myself—it was much more time effective throwing caution to the wind and skipping straight to the fun part, but watching how he recoiled didn’t bode well for that plan.

“I will not force or rush you, human. I’m not a complete heathen,” I assured him, glad

when he relaxed somewhat. “But just to be perfectly clear, you will be no further ahead until you give what is required.”

He swallowed thickly, and I traced the action with my gaze. “So, if I sleep with you once, you can leave me in peace and my shop won’t be in ruins?”

Sweet. Tartarus.

I had never met someone so reluctant to bend me over and fuck me, and it was giving my ego the pounding that my arse craved. It had me debating whether the end result would even be worth the blow to my dignity, but I had to remain positive. I’d dug my heels in thus far, ‘committed to the bit’ as they said, and despite his difficult nature, I still wanted to ruin the stubborn creature, to see his mouth put to uses other than yapping himself in boring circles. Call me a glutton for punishment.

Besides, wasn’t it known that the reward was infinitely more thrilling after a chase?

“Since I can only assist in your success, and not supply instant luck or fortune, it may take time for my presence to yield its desired effect,” I explained. “The exact time frame alternates case by case.”

“Right.” For a beat, he fell silent, his gaze zeroing in on the far wall. I didn’t disturb him—he clearly thought the offer required a full analysis, so I distracted myself by studying his intricacies, greedily taking him in.

He was... attractive, in an angelic sort of way, and that was a joke at my expense if I’d ever heard one. With his perfect blond curls, bright blue eyes, and best of all, those flushed, cherubic cheeks. I couldn’t tell if it was a permanent blush or a result of his mild distress. Not that it mattered. I found it endearing, and I wagered it would only grow fiercer as I took him apart, deepening into a splotchy, tear-streaked mess while I brought him to heights he could never even dream of.

Involuntarily, my eyes traced the sharp points of his cupid's bow, over the downward curve of those luscious, pouty lips that had never tasted true debauchery. Hades' taint , but how enchanting they would look parted and spit-slicked, moaning in reverence as I rode his—

“Okay,” he announced, stealing my attention, “I’ve decided what I’m going to do.”

I clapped my hands once, smiling brightly. “Excellent news.”

With all the determination of Cerberus with a bone, he said, “I’m going to sleep on it, and tomorrow, I’m going back to that magic shop to get a refund.”

My grin faltered.

Fifteen minutes I had been in this realm, and I’d already been subjected to a level of disrespect I’d never known before. He had no reason to fear me, or the consequences of rejecting me, but it was clear that he didn’t , and that was just plain rude. He was face to face with a demon , a powerful being of fire and ash, and had barely regarded me with appropriate awe—not after his initial panic at my entrance, at least. I could have stripped the meat from his bones in mere seconds, but there he was, making decisions and talking of sleep as if he believed otherwise.

Either he had balls of steel or he was even more depressed than I’d originally thought.

Or had I lost my touch?

“You didn’t pay,” I finally said, and he smoothed his hands over the covers in his lap, getting comfortable.

“Well then, I’ll just have to offer him my firstborn.”

“You must really hate your child,” I replied absently, my eyes glued to him, trying to decide if his audacity deserved a death sentence or not.

“What? No, I don’t have—” He huffed and waved a hand. “Never mind. What matters is, I’m not going to take advantage of you, and I don’t fancy having a posh-as-fuck demon haunting my flat until I die. No offence.” He gave me a look, and I nodded—he had acknowledged my elegance, so that was a point in his favour.

“So, I’m going to send you home, or try to, but in the meantime, there’s a room down the hall if you want to sleep. Don’t steal anything, but do help yourself to whatever food’s in the fridge. If you’re real and I’m not hallucinating, I’ll see you in the morning.”

With that, he snatched the floral-print quilt and boldly dragged it over his head, effectively ending the conversation .

I had made my decision.

He could live.

For now .

“As you wish,” I said, clasping my hands behind my back. “Out of curiosity, will you be freeing me? Or am I to stand here all evening?”

“What?” he mumbled from under his blanket fort before peeking out the top to ask, “How do I do that?”

“Break the circle.” I was powerful, yes, but not so much that I could free myself from a summoning circle of this calibre—a weakness that I wouldn’t be admitting out loud.

With only minimal grumbling, he threw the covers aside and crawled towards the end of the bed, but before proceeding further, he peered down at the ash, then back to me.

He bit his lip as he hesitated.

“You won’t hurt me, right?” he asked.

Ah, finally, some self-preservation. It was better late than never, I supposed.

“Only if you beg for it.”

He laughed nervously at my show of fang. “Yeah, no.”

I shrugged in a ‘suit yourself’ motion, and with one last wary look, he leaned over the edge, and blessed me with a lovely view of his arse in the air.

He swiped a hand through the ashes before rising again quickly, his face pink from the angle. “That work?”

I stretched out my arms and nodded in appreciation, the invisible shackles around my wrists and ankles falling away instantly, no longer rooting me to the spot. Our tether still pulsed strongly in my chest, but I was no longer confined to just two feet of carpet, at least.

“I do not need much sleep, so I shall watch over you,” I declared, wandering over to the drab off-white armchair in the corner. There was a green pillow with embroidered leaves on it, so it wasn’t all doom and gloom.

“Fine, whatever,” the human muttered as he settled back into bed with an unintelligible gripe, but before he could hide away again, I had an imperative question to ask.

“Not to sound insensitive, my dear, and the state of your floors may be answer enough, but do you not have servants? Or a maid?”

He shot me a dry look that wasn't strictly necessary or justified coming from someone who used their furniture as a laundry basket. “Do you honestly think I'd have resorted to joke shop magic spells if I had servants?”

“Hmm.” My enthusiasm wavered as I picked up an article of dirty clothing that I didn't want to give too much consideration to, and threw it on the floor to make space. I felt the human's eyes still boring into me like daggers, so I turned, smiling wider, and finally settled myself on the cushions. “Do sleep well, won't you,” I said sweetly, lowering my voice to tack on, “As well as can be expected on that lumpy mattress.”

The creature did not dignify that with a response, he just rolled over, reburied himself in his paper-thin covers, and fell asleep. It was almost impressive that despite all the excitement—and having a stranger in his bedroom—his breathing evened out fairly quickly. The soft, muffled snores rising from the pillows weren't as irritating as they should have been, so I crossed one leg over the other and relaxed, my gaze fixed on the sleeping mound.

Recalling what the human had said earlier, the spell had brought me here for a reason. The need for wealth and success was but a minor part of some greater intention, and whether I liked it or not, our fates were aligned. I didn't yet know why that ‘wizard’ had given him such potent magic, but the reason would no doubt make itself known in due course.

I'd just have to sit back, enjoy the fruits of my imprisonment, and offer his colourless life a little sparkle.

Even if he didn't agree to the terms, I wouldn't deny myself the chance to play with

my new toy in other, increasingly creative ways. Perhaps I'd even be charitable and allow him a few freebies, if only to see those pretty eyes light up with awe.

And really, was there anything in the universe more entertaining than capturing the devotion of pretty things?

We'll see.

Chapter four

ISAAC

Well, it wasn't a dream. I'd summoned a demon—if the scantily dressed, legs-for-days being with horns and fangs currently in my kitchen, swaying his hips to whatever song played on the TV as he made breakfast was anything to go by. Though, it was only seven a.m., so hallucinations were still a strong possibility.

Except, I couldn't even luxuriate in that illusion as my awareness was, surprisingly, dialled up to a solid eighty-five. Waking up to a stranger in my flat, poking at my microwave as if it was diseased, could be thanked for that.

It hadn't escaped me just how delayed that reaction was, but in fairness, I'd expected sleeping on it to do the trick and that, like all nightmares, it could eventually be forgotten. No such luck, obviously, so only now was the realisation slamming into me that every sceptical thought I'd ever had was a big fat lie.

I should've been shitting my pants, right? I mean, demons existed, and if we were being frank, how his eyes had flared was shit-in-boxers-worthy on its own. But because I had absolutely no survival instincts left to speak of, and my priorities were a little tunnel-visioned, all my overloaded brain could focus on was how I always managed to get myself into these messes.

At that point, it had to count as a special skill. Like, seriously. This was beyond a joke, even for me and my track record. Ironic too, given my lack of belief. Well, I had no fucking choice but to believe now, did I? The evidence was right fucking there,

shaking his arse and bobbing his horned head to a tune.

Christ, those horns really were protruding from his scalp and twisting toward the ceiling. There was no mistaking it. Any of it. He wasn't just some hot stranger who'd broken into my house in the middle of the night, was he?

Shitting shitballs .

"I would ask where you got all this stuff from, but right now, I don't really have the capacity to give a toss." By stuff, I meant the food strewn across every available countertop, food that I definitely did not have before.

I had the essentials—I wasn't completely destitute—but a full fridge was a distant memory for me.

The demon peered over his shoulder, that roguish smirk of his firmly in place. "Magic," he said, voice barely above a rasp, smooth as silk.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Of course. Silly me. "

He reached up to grab something from the cupboard and I tried not to stare at the way his robe clung to every indecent curve of his body. I really did.

"Your cabinets were bare." He stated the obvious. "It was utterly depressing, my dear."

"Mhm, yeah. That'll be because I'm skint."

He gasped, a hand flying to his chest as if clutching pearls. "How tragic." A beat of silence for the fallen. "Well, it's a good thing I'm here now, isn't it?"

“Wonderful,” I said with all the dryness I could muster. “Always wanted my own fairy godmother, but I thought you weren’t going to help me until I paid for your services. That came out wrong, but the observation still stands.”

He shrugged. “Does it really count if I’m also helping myself? It wouldn’t do for me to starve, now would it?”

That almost startled a maniacal laugh out of me.

This was nuts. How could I still be so calm? This handsome being was quite capable of killing me with his pinkie finger—had a pretty reasonable motive for it, too—but there I was, discussing the state of my food stores instead of... I dunno, doing whatever normal people did in these types of situations. An exorcism? That seemed harsh, and I could not for the life of me find the energy to worry enough about it to resort to such drastic measures. Had I truly reached the point of skipping straight to the final stage of resigned acceptance? Perhaps my stress tank was already so full that no matter what unhinged bullshit the universe threw at me, it just floated like a feather on the top—aimless, but there .

Adding pressure to a sinking ship wasn’t going to make it any worse. It was already sinking. It would just sink a wee bit quicker.

“Fair enough,” I said absently, deciding to treat this as if it were any other regular ole inconvenience.

What else could I do?

I wrestled my trainers onto my feet without unlacing them before gathering my coat.

“Well, I’m going to go see a guy about sending you home.”

“Aw, must you?” He whirled around, frying pan in hand, and pouted. “You could

have breakfast first? We could get to know each other better.” He was trying to provoke me, to tempt me for Christ knows what reason. It was obvious, but I held firm.

The eggs, despite their slightly burnt tinge, smelled better than the pot noodles I’d been eating for the past week. My stomach even growled in protest when I shook my head.

I couldn’t get distracted.

“Would love to,” I half lied. “But I’m going out.” I shrugged on my coat before snatching my car keys and wallet from the fruit bowl. It wasn’t until I grabbed the door handle, ready to leave, that I spoke again. “For the sake of my health, if nothing else, please stay out of trouble.”

A smug grin to rival all others split his face, and I regretted even suggesting it .

“Can’t make any promises, pet.”

I had left a demon in my flat. Unsupervised. Not my brightest decision, I knew, but needs must. I couldn’t exactly have brought him. While his eyes and clothes could probably fly under the radar, the horns and fangs were a different kettle of fish. No doubt they could be magically hidden away—what with all those powers he’d used to conjure up the expensive butter—but even so, this was a small village, a tight-knit community where everyone knew everyone, and those people talked . The last thing I needed was to be hounded about ‘dating’ accusations, or for that particular vein of tattling to reach my mother’s ears.

That would surely drive me over the edge.

She was overbearing at the best of times, and yeah, alright, she just didn’t want me to

end up alone, which I sort of understood—it was a parent’s worst fear, right? But ‘settling down with a nice fella and finding a more stable job’ wasn’t on the cards for me at present, no matter how much she nagged. I’d invested too much in this business to throw up my white flag already, and my life was too shambolic to be thinking of bringing someone else into the mix .

I was perfectly capable of multitasking, but a bloke could only juggle so much.

Besides, even if I wanted to start dating, which I didn’t, this situation wasn’t even a contender, and I wanted to keep it that way. This was about me dealing with the consequences of summoning a demon, and the fewer people who knew about that, or his existence, the better.

Witchcraft or satanic ritual probably wouldn’t be their first guess—assuming his demon parts could be concealed—but it wasn’t worth the hassle trying to defend myself. Once the gossips had decided the ‘facts,’ there was no going back. I could swear blind that he was my eccentric cousin, but the knowing looks, or the ‘your secret’s safe with me’s from the old dears who frequented the shop would still happen. Daily.

Spoiler alert, but a secret—even a fake one—wasn’t ever safe in a place like this.

Not for long.

It wasn’t that I’d be ashamed of people thinking I went out with someone like him. The opposite, actually. He was stunning; a bit of a tosser, but looks-wise, he was a catch, and I’d have been lucky to have people think he was mine. But that was irrelevant. He was a demon , a literal being from hell, and even if I could ignore his ties to evil, it was crystal clear that we ran in different circles.

The way he’d screwed his nose up at the sight of my room had been enough of a clue.

It was a shite hole, granted. I hadn't exactly had the time to do a spring clean before his arrival, but come on. His reaction had exceeded disgust and flown straight into deep-rooted snobbery. So what if I had a few shirts and socks acting as a rug? Any normal person would've plastered on a smile and passed judgement inside their own head, but he'd tiptoed around as if I were a peasant living in squalor.

I absolutely was not.

When I could be arsed—or was in the right mood—I took pride in my home. 'Polishing a turd' came to mind, but it wasn't my fault that the cheapest place to rent was the poxy shoebox flat above my shop, so I worked with what I had. He was just a privileged twat, and we had absolutely nothing in common, so even if I could overlook the demon thing, we weren't compatible.

And why on earth am I even giving it thought?

I squeezed the steering wheel tighter and forced my attention back to the road, grateful that my inner monologuing was good for something. It had killed the already-short journey, so I hadn't the time to spiral further and start imagining what our babies might've looked like.

That level of delusion wasn't on my to-do list.

As soon as the street was in sight, I pulled into the nearest empty parking space at the side of the road, deciding to walk the rest. There was no dawdling or grace in the way I locked the car and shoved the keys into my back pocket—the sooner this whole mess was sorted, the better for everyone involved. However, after barely a few hurried strides in the direction of the shop, I realised something was off .

It wasn't there.

It was now a... bookshop? The red sign above the door had been replaced with a worn-down script that read, Claremont Tomes & Tales—a place I'd never seen or heard of as it definitely hadn't been there before. I looked further down the street, making sure I hadn't taken a wrong turn, but the same charity shop and newsagent still stood at either side, and the same missing-cat poster—albeit with a heart-warming 'Found' and a thank you note sharpied across it—was tacked to the lamp post at the edge of the pavement.

I narrowed my eyes as my mind raced through several possibilities, each more ridiculous than the last, but there had to be a rational explanation. I refused to further entertain the supernatural, not when I had plenty of that to contend with back at my flat—half-naked and making breakfast. So, much like before, I pretended it was a figment of my imagination and went inside.

It was oddly comforting to be greeted by the walls of books I remembered, but gone were the high shelves and ladders that had given me vertigo, replaced with average-height bookcases and shorter stepping stools. There were no narrow aisles filled with witchy supplies, or anything really. It was a small, square shop—the size I had expected on my first visit—selling dusty old books, nothing else.

Where had it all gone?

“Good morning! Are you looking for something in particular?” The kind voice startled me from my exploration, and I spun around to see a young woman, barely twenty, wearing round glasses and a pair of paint-covered dungarees. She was standing behind the only counter in the place, grinning widely in welcome.

She hadn't been here yesterday, but at this point, I had no choice other than conceding that none of this was the same as yesterday. Despite how much I wanted it to be the case, this wasn't a rushed paint job or a pop-up shop situation. It was magic, plain and simple, and I didn't yet know how to process that information.

Or if I ever really would.

With a sigh, I trudged forwards, already knowing my trip was pointless, but still clinging to whatever remained of my sanity. “Yeah, good morning. I was here yesterday, and I spoke to the tall guy with the hat...” I waved a hand above my head, ignoring the girl’s confused frown. “Is he working today? I really need to speak to him.”

“I’m the only person who works the till,” she said with an apologetic smile. “My mum is usually on the shop floor, but she’s in the back room today.”

“There’s no one else?” I was desperate, and probably sounded crazy when I added, “He looked like a kids’ party magician.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t say I know anyone like that.” Poor lass probably thought I’d suffered a blow to the head and was now wandering around, lost and confused. Least she was nice about it. “Did you catch their name, lovey?”

I shook my head, dejection settling into my bones. “No.”

“Are you sure it was here?” she asked when I offered no other information. “Tony, the guy in the butcher’s a few doors down, is pretty tall and he wears a hair net?”

I leaned on the counter, breathing out an exasperated, almost silent, “It was a top hat.”

“Sorry?”

“Nothing.” It wasn’t worth repeating, none of it was, and though I hated admitting defeat, there was no denying that all I’d done was waste time and petrol. The guy had quite literally saddled me with a demon, then fucked off with zero trace.

He couldn't have made his no returns policy any clearer.

I straightened and took a step back, faking a smile. "I must have gotten my shops mixed up. Silly me. Thanks, anyway." I turned to leave, but before reaching the door, that soft, friendly voice called after me.

"You're sure there's nothing else I can help you with?"

"No, no, you're fine," I assured her, the bell above the door jingling as I tugged it open. Better to get out of there before she called the police to have me committed. "Have a nice day."

All the breath in my lungs left me on a slow exhale as I stepped outside. What the fuck am I meant to do now?

Coming here had already blown a valuable hour that could have been spent working. Technically, it was my day off, but what good was one of those when I was stuck up shit creek without a paddle and falling so fast towards debt one had to wonder how I still stood upright? Absolutely none, was the answer to that, but demon summoning had put a hold on productivity, funnily enough, and my routine had to suffer.

I headed back to my car, my forehead connecting with the steering wheel as soon as I flopped my arse inside. Had I honestly thought it would be as simple as returning a shirt that was too small? Just nip back into the shop and come out one hell-born being lighter, no sweat.

Idiot. Of course it was going to be a pain in the hole—it wouldn't be a consequence of my actions otherwise. But now I was out of ideas and no further forwards.

Even the demon hadn't offered anything more of use. Not that I'd asked, but he'd seemed happy as Larry dancing around my kitchen as if he wasn't literally shackled

to a failing florist in the arsehole of Scotland. I thought I had made it perfectly clear that finding a more user-friendly exit clause was my goal, but he hadn't expressed any interest in a way out. Which was no help at all. In fact, it made it worse. He was powerful, I'd seen it with my own eyes, and though he'd said sticking around until my wishes were met or I died were the only options, there had to be some loophole or counter spell.

Deals with devils were tricky, right? They were never black and white, more a shade of morally grey. But since the bastard obviously had no desire to leave, he also had no desire to help me work it out.

I could have begged, but something told me he would enjoy it and I didn't feel particularly charitable or willing to let go of the last sliver of pride I had. No, any path that involved demon intervention would prove even more hopeless than going back to the magic man had turned out to be.

So, what else was there?

Forehead still moulded to the leather wheel, I peeled my eyes open—as if a glimpse of the footwell would help me think better—and shifted my head from side to side, evening out the indent I no doubt had across my brow. It wasn't until the fourth neck crick that I started questioning my life choices, and suddenly, it dawned on me how I'd even found myself here in the first place.

The thought hit me like lightning, the source of my issue smacking me square in the face.

Sitting up with a start, I flipped down the sun visor and fished out the card I'd stuffed into the thin pocket there yesterday. The card with The Magic Shop's address. The unassuming slip of paper I'd been given just in case I decided to grit my teeth and seek help.

By my brother.

Of course. He was the one who'd introduced me to this circus in the beginning, so maybe he could do it again?

Decision made, I wrestled my phone from my pocket, unlocked it and tapped the only number in my favourites. It rang three times before connecting.

"Alright, mate," Wayne answered, his cheery voice tinged with surprise. "You missing me already?"

"Wayne ."

There was a pause, then a soft curse came through the speaker, followed by a sheepish, "What's up?"

"That wizard you sent me to..." I waited to let him catch up. "How do I get a hold of him once his shop disappears into outer space?"

"Oh, er..." There was a nervous laugh. "You can't? Apparently, he only pops up to help whoever needs him, then he leaves. That's kind of his whole thing. Didn't I tell you that?"

I let my head drop back against the headrest and closed my eyes, regretting not having had the presence of mind to come away with a debilitating spell of some sort. Then we'd both be suffering at the expense of my downfall. "Nope, you failed to mention that part. Or any part, actually."

I wasn't mad. Not really. It wasn't Wayne's fault I hadn't bothered to ask questions. I'd been too busy scoffing at the possibility of ending up at some back-alley organ harvester to fully absorb all the specifics.

In hindsight, would the loss of my vital organs have been preferred?

“Soooo,” he said into the silence. “You actually went to him, then? What’d he say?”

“Oh, nothing much.” I responded with the appropriate amount of sarcasm. “Gave me a spell and said I had to learn a lesson before all my dreams could come true. ‘Don’t trust weirdos in pop-up shops’ probably wasn’t what he meant, but it’s what I’m taking from it. ”

“Did you do the spell?” my brother asked, as if that were a perfectly reasonable question. It tore a short laugh from me.

“Are you serious? Why is this whole situation not completely bonkers to you?”

“Maybe because I’m open-minded, and I believe that magic isn’t just a fairy tale. Which, you already know ...?” Okay, yeah, I did. It was a topic that came up for us every so often. Normally, we disagreed—with me being the diehard sceptic in this brotherhood—but now, my denial would have been considered gaslighting, so I just hummed in blithe agreement. “Right, so answer the bloody question.”

For a split second, I thought about telling him the truth. He’d take it seriously, after judging my stupidity and probably gloating about my confirmation of the supernatural’s existence, but what would it really accomplish? It wouldn’t make the problem go away, and I didn’t need him trying to convince me to just sleep with the guy. That decision was mine and mine alone. I also stood by my desire not to broadcast the mistake to the town, and though I trusted Wayne not to blab, giving the issue airtime felt counterproductive, like it would make things worse—more real .

I could handle it myself, as I usually did, and if that turned out not to be the case, well, I’d cross that bridge when I came to it.

And I'd be sure not to resort to magic spells a second time.

"No," I said, resolute.

Almost immediately, there was a scoff through the line .

"Lies." Tosser . "Someone who hadn't performed a magic spell—especially someone who was as against the idea of a magic shop as you were—wouldn't have hesitated that long."

Again... Tosser .

"Yes, fine. I did."

"And?"

"And nothing. It was pointless. I now have ashes in my carpet fibres that'll probably be there forever. Oh, and I got a free playing card. How life-changing."

" Tarot card," he corrected me, and I rolled my eyes.

"Whatever. The point is, it was a waste of time."

"Then why are you looking for the guy?" he asked, tone a little too knowing for my liking. "Are you expecting a refund on your wasted time ?"

"You're impossible."

"And you're full of shit," he said. I sent him a dry glare through the phone, hoping he could sense it. "Something happened, didn't it? I know you, Iz, you can't lie to save your hide. I don't know why you even try to."

Thinking a phone call with Wayne would be a quick, no-details-exchanged chat had been very optimistic on my part. He was a perceptive asshole at best, a psychic at worst, and as he said, no matter how much I tried to deny it, he did know me. Too well. The only person who actually did. And though he always let me solve shit on my own, it never put him off asking questions. Especially if he thought I was in trouble. He was a pretty good big brother .

The best, really.

“Okay, yes, something happened, but—” I cut myself off with a sigh, scrubbing a hand through my hair. My skin was starting to feel way too tight. “Look, I don’t want to dig into it right now. I will , once I find a way to reverse it or figure out another route, but I’m at capacity for socialisation and I need to process it all myself first.”

“Hey, no pressure! It’s your business and I won’t push, even though I’m dying to. But...” He hesitated. “Are you safe, Iz? That’s all I care about.”

“Yeah, I think so... Yeah.” The demon hadn’t killed me yet. That was my gauge. “I was just... I was hoping to make it all go away quickly, y’know?”

“You’re not gonna like what I’m about to say...”

Judging by the cringe in his voice, I didn’t doubt it, but I hummed for him to continue, anyway. May as well take whatever advice he had to offer.

“If the guy said you have to learn a lesson, then that’s the only way out of this. The terms of the agreement have to be honoured.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. I didn’t like that answer. “Wonderful.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” he said after a beat, voice filled with regret. It made

the tension in my body ease. “I should have given you more warning about the whole thing. I just... I half expected you to look at the sign and go home. ”

I huffed a faint laugh. “Desperation got the better of me. The window display wasn’t too shabby either.”

“I’m sorry, Iz.”

“Don’t be,” I said easily. “You did nothing wrong.”

I bumped my head against the headrest, staring up at the car roof for a moment.

I hadn’t meant to make Wayne feel guilty. Maybe I’d felt a little blamey in the beginning, but ringing him was a last-ditch attempt at fixing a problem, nothing more. While yes, he was technically to blame for giving me the cursed address, he hadn’t forced me to act on it. I’d chosen to go inside, I’d chosen to take the spell, and I’d chosen to perform it. He’d meant no malice, that went without saying. He’d noticed my suffering, seen what he thought was a reasonable solution, and tried to help. How could anyone fault him for that?

Besides, whether he actually had helped wasn’t clear yet. I’d just have to wait and see.

“You know, you can usually transfer things like this to someone else?” I knew exactly where he was going before he even added, “I could take—”

“Absolutely not.” I sat up straighter. “This is my mess, so either I’ll fix it or I’ll suffer through it. Not you. No.”

“Alright, alright,” he agreed, though it sounded strained. “Well, if there’s anything I can do, you know I’m here for you.”

For the first time in too long, I felt myself smile properly. “Yeah, I know. I’ll keep you updated. Maybe. ”

Wayne laughed, the sound genuine and rich. “After twenty-eight years, I’ve learned not to take your weeks of silence, or your refusal of help, to heart.”

“What did I do to deserve such an understanding brother, huh?”

“I’m a fucking saint. I have to be, to deal with your stubborn arse.”

I snorted, not exactly disagreeing. “Love you too.”

The call ended not long after, and I sat there for several minutes, staring at nothing. While I felt a smidge lighter having spoken to my brother, all it had really achieved was drilling in the fact that nothing could be done. I’d tried, and I’d failed. I had no other options but to either accept the terms and have my needs fulfilled, or spend the rest of my life with a hellish being attached to my hip. There was no current favourite, surprisingly, but no matter what I chose, only one thing was certain...

For the foreseeable, I had a demon roommate.

And I didn’t know how to feel about it.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:27 pm

Chapter five

ISAAC

The demon— I really ought to learn his name if he's going to be a semi-permanent fixture in my home —was still in my flat when I returned, and thankfully, nothing was on fire or broken. He was, however, wearing significantly less clothing than when I'd left him. It should have been an impossible feat considering he'd only had a robe on this morning. But there he was, in my living room, lounging at one end of the sofa with a book in his hand, showing his wares and seeming entirely unbothered about it.

I was no prude, but come on.

That had to be grounds for eviction, surely?

Gone were the drapes of fabric hanging from his hips, and the long, veil-like shawl that had been covering his shoulders when he'd arrived. Even his waist-length ginger hair was swept out of the way, tied into a high ponytail between his horns to show off the shimmering jewels that adorned his thin, pointed ears .

His robe, at least, had covered everything bar his collarbones, ankles, and wrists. It had been indecently figure-hugging, leaving little to the imagination, but still something . His current outfit had no such wiggle room. He wore a silk vest, cropped at his ribcage, displaying the delicate chains dangling around his waist like a body necklace, the silver a beautiful complement to his brown skin. It was also sleeveless, revealing his toned arms and the bejewelled bangles cinching his biceps. His harem

pants sat low on his hips, cuffed above the ankles but slit up the outsides to show his long legs.

He was a vision, that was undeniable, and from where I stood in the doorway, it was as if he was posed just for me, like the subject of a renaissance painting. His relaxed demeanour screamed royalty, so poised and perfect. He was still out of place in my bland shoebox flat, but he looked more at ease in his surroundings than when he'd descended on me like a pretentious, sassy hurricane.

I let out a soft laugh.

Seeing him like that had me wondering if maybe it wouldn't be so bad having him around. He'd definitely liven the dreary walls up a bit, and he'd obviously had no trouble adjusting to our predicament after such a small acclimatisation period, so why couldn't I? Sure, he was an immortal being who most likely antagonised people for fun, but it wasn't as if he could get up to too much mischief here—hopefully—so he wasn't exactly in the way .

Saying any of that out loud, though, would have felt like admitting defeat. Or at least admitting I'd failed at fixing one more thing life had kindly thrown at me, and I wasn't very good at that, so I'd just have to think it instead.

“You know...” the demon said without looking up. He didn't have all of his metal claw-cuffs on, only the pointer finger and thumb, and I found myself mesmerised by the way they flexed as he flipped the page. “It's rude to stare, pet.”

I cringed, realising I'd been fully ogling him. “Sorry,” I said before stepping further into the room—deciding it best not to linger in the doorway like a creep. “I didn't mean to.”

Finally, his eyes lifted from the page and fixed themselves to mine, a wicked, fang-

filled smirk on his lips. “Don’t be, I like a little rudeness.”

He curled his legs closer to himself, presumably to make room for me on the couch, but I was too distracted by his bare feet to sit. Or rather, by the pretty jingle of his anklets as they moved.

I stayed standing.

“What, er—” I coughed to clear my throat. “What have you been doing since I left?”

“Snooping, mostly.” Least he was honest about it. “Which took less than thirty minutes, what with your house being so small.” Arsehole. “I also took it upon myself to set some wards since security is extremely lax here. I’m far too important to be left vulnerable and unattended.”

“You? Vulnerable ? Somehow, I highly doubt that. ”

He pouted. “I am a delicate flower who needs a handsome knight to keep me safe and protected at all times.” Shrugging, he tacked on, “But since you haven’t yet fallen for my wit and charm, magic shields will have to do.”

Nope, I was wrong. Having him here would be as terrible as I’d first anticipated.

“Mhm.”

“Unless you’d like to change that right now?” With his book clasped in one hand, he began idly rubbing at his collarbone with the pads of the unarmoured fingers on the other. His bottom lip was pinned between his sharp teeth, and his legs were ever so slightly parted.

I wasn’t made of steel—his seductions were unbelievably convincing, and a subtle

yet deliberate tilt of his hips almost had me giving in, but I couldn't. It wasn't a 'save myself for marriage' situation, or that I was waiting for the right man to come along and sweep me off my feet. Not really. It was just sort of... nerve-wracking. I'd delayed so long that the thought of finally taking that leap scared the shite out of me, and the added pressure of doing it with someone as fit as him made that feeling ten times worse. I mean, next to him, anyone would have felt inadequate, and without sounding too self-deprecating, I ended up disappointing everyone, so why would this be any different?

Better men probably would have said 'fuck it' and knelt at his feet already, but I had no experience in this department. Everything we did would be awkward and fumbly, and that only served to add another medal of embarrassment to my extensive collection.

No, it was best to resist, and save myself the bloody stress.

Even if the temptation was killing me.

Swallowing thickly, I tore my gaze away. "I'm good."

His sly grin as he returned to his book made me shift from foot to foot. "Was your outing fruitful?"

"No." Needing to busy myself, I slid my coat off and hung it up on the rack by the door. "Guess you'll be living here for the time being..."

"Did I not already prepare you for that outcome?"

I ignored his snarky interruption. "So, treat the place like your home. Do whatever you want."

He hummed. "I appreciate the permission, though I already was."

The fucker wanted me to bite, but I refused to give him further satisfaction. "What is your name, anyway? If you're going to be around, I can't keep calling you demon ." I lowered my voice to add, "Or asshole."

His back stiffened, his smile wavering briefly before it returned. I'd almost missed it. "You may call me Ash. If it pleases you."

I frowned at his reaction. "Not your real name?"

"It is a... nickname."

I wouldn't pry, though I would file it away for later. "Very fitting, what with you being a phoenix demon and all. "

"Astutely observed, pet," he cooed mockingly, and I couldn't have restrained the glare I sent him, even if I'd tried.

"Right. Well, help yourself to anything." I turned on my heel, heading towards the bathroom. "I'm going for a shower."

"What is yours?" he called, making my steps falter.

"Huh?"

Ash peered up at me, eyebrow cocked. "Your name."

"Ah... Isaac. Though, if your snooping skills are even half as impressive as your audacity, you already knew that."

The smirk on his face confirmed that assumption, but he dipped his head in polite greeting, anyway.

“Pleasure to be meeting you, Isaac Miller.” To my instant mortification, a blush spread across my cheeks at the sound of my name on his tongue. I’d have to get a handle on that, pronto. “Before you leave, I found something of yours that interested me.”

Heart skipping and mouth suddenly dry as desert sand, I drifted back to the sofa, curious and nervous in equal measure. “Hm?”

Thankfully, when Ash clicked his magic fingers, the still-boxed Fleshlight I’d purchased a few months ago and hidden under my bed didn’t materialise. Instead, it was the leaflet for the Flower Festival. “You should enter.”

I exhaled, long and slow. “Oh, er, I’m not ready for that. Someday, maybe. But not yet.”

“Why not? ”

“I’m almost ninety-nine percent sure it would solve all of my business problems.”

He frowned, rightfully so. “That sounds like the opposite of a bad thing.”

“The top three winners get massive cash prizes.” I carried on as if I hadn’t heard him. “But also, recognition. That’s TV time, news articles. The guy who won last year just opened his third shop.”

With a sigh, Ash put down his book and sat up straighter, angling himself fully towards me. “I’m failing to see the point you’re obviously attempting—terribly—to make.”

“It’s a big deal . Thousands of florists apply from all over the country, but since there’s only so many spots, the selection process has to be particular. Brutal. The winners are always very experienced, and very well-off already. It would be pointless for me to even try.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t you just—”

“I heard your slew of irrelevant points, yes, but why don’t you think you’re experienced enough?”

“I’ve only been doing this a couple of years.” I shrugged. “I’m a tiny fish in a massive pond. Not even a fish, I’m a grain of salt.”

“You’re talented at what you do, yes? And once upon a time, you believed in yourself enough to set up this business—a feat that not many achieve.” He tilted his head. “Where is that belief now?”

“That’ s not—” I ground my teeth. “I have to be rational, and rationally, I’m not at that level yet. You should see some of these people, the creations they can pull out of their arses. I’d never win, so entering is a waste of time.”

One of his brows ticked up. “You are a fortune teller now? How quaint.”

“You know,” I said blandly. “You may actually be more of an interfering pain in my arse than my brother.”

He beamed as if it was a compliment and barrelled on, undeterred. “What is it you humans say... ‘fortune favours the bold?’ An interesting concept. A little naive, but not entirely without merit.”

“And I can still be bold in a few years,” I said, well and truly done with this conversation. “If I haven’t sunk myself into debt by then.”

“Or you could do it while you have the advantage of an extra pair of hands. Powerful hands,” he said. He was persistent, I’d give him that, and also exuded more confidence than I would ever have. I was a little jealous. “Regrets are better left to the dying, my dear. Why force them upon yourself early?”

I didn’t bother repeating that I hadn’t yet shelled out for his assistance; I suspected he was well aware of the fact and was doing whatever the hell he wanted regardless. Or he was just positive that I’d break soon and was planning accordingly. To what end, I didn’t dare ask. Some twisted game for his own amusement, probably. Either way, I was already learning how hopeless it was to contradict him .

Given the spoiled brat persona, he was the type who’d have an adverse reaction to the word ‘no’ and would sign me up himself just to be spiteful. It was easier for everyone involved to let him think I was taking his suggestions on board. Even if I was already planning to rip up the leaflet and set it alight.

I took the offending item from him and nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“Well, don’t take too long, the cut-off is in three days.” He picked his book up again, reclining on the sofa as if he owned it. “Oh, and I took the liberty of copying down the details, in case you have any funny notions of ridding yourself of the leaflet. Or are too slow.”

I stared at the back of his head in suspicion, debating whether he could somehow read my mind or if I was just alarmingly transparent, before realising it was out of my control and not worth worrying about.

Throwing my hands up with a scoff, I finally left the room, but halfway down the

hall, something made me hesitate, a voice in my head that urged me to scan the contest details once more with clearer eyes and reassess.

“ Once upon a time, you believed in yourself... ”

“ Where is that belief now? ”

The faintest smile tugged at my lips without permission. Shaking my head in disbelief, and before I could talk myself out of it, I marched to my bedroom, where I booted up my laptop and drafted a new email.

Fucking nosy demons.

First the robe, then the crop top, and now nothing but a towel and the water droplets clinging to his skin like morning dew. Ash was doing it on purpose. He had to be. He wanted me to cave, or to give me an aneurysm so he could leave, one state of undress at a time. Those were the only two theories I could muster as we both stepped into the hallway at, conveniently , the same time—me leaving my bedroom as he exited the bathroom, a cloud of steam billowing behind him.

I'd slept decently for the first time in months, and all I'd wanted was to sneak into the kitchen, make my coffee, and drink it in peace before having to get ready for work. Ash had timed his interruption of my plans perfectly. It wasn't innocent—I'd wager nothing he'd ever done was innocent, not with that impish grin plastered to his face and those dark, enticing eyes meeting mine as if challenging me to make the first move.

But I was frozen.

My feet were rooted to the floor just past my doorway, and I gripped the frame for both balance and distraction. No sound came from either of us as we locked gazes,

only the ambient noises of a lived-in flat—the fan in the bathroom whirring for its life, and the drains gurgling with every last drop of his bathwater. It was easy to drown them out, especially with blood rushing in my ears and my pulse racing.

Without a hint of shyness, Ash held my gaze as he unhooked the towel hanging from his waist and let it pool around his feet, leaving him completely bare. He straightened to his full height, the tips of his horns almost brushing the ceiling, chin raised as if inviting me to gawp at him, to take in exactly what I was missing. He didn't need to be naked for that. I already knew he was sin incarnate, but having the visual proof—ginger hair cascading like wet silk down his back, lean muscles reflecting the dawn's yellow light, and his cock, smooth and pretty, nestled between soft, toned thighs—drove the point home.

My dick twitched with interest. I couldn't help it. It was my first time seeing a man naked in the flesh, and he was flawless. Of course my body would react. But it wasn't just that. Ash's confidence was intoxicating. It was arrogance, a god complex that didn't seem entirely misplaced, and I should've hated it, but I couldn't. He was everything I wasn't. We were opposites in every way, and it both terrified and aroused me. It made me want to run for the hills, but also beg .

Obviously impatient with my lack of decision on the matter, Ash stalked towards me, steps silent and calculated, movements sinuous. He towered a head or so above me, standing so close the heat radiating from his skin seeped into mine and his breath kissed my face. No part of us was touching—not even the obscene tent in my boxers grazed his leg, surprisingly—but I still felt pinned, bracketed to the wall by his self-assured posture and the hunger in his eyes.

My heartbeat quickened.

“I don't want to use you,” I murmured, throat dry.

It wasn't a refusal, and with the way Ash's eyes flared in victory, he realised it, too.

"Then let me use you," he purred before lowering himself gracefully to his knees, the sight enough to steal all the breath from my lungs. "Why keep denying yourself when we both know you desire me?"

Fucked if I knew the answer to that. Fucked if I knew anything. Not when his fingers were trailing through the coarse hairs on my belly before dipping under the waistband of my boxers. All thoughts in my brain grew foggy, and I had to close my eyes and steady myself as he lifted the hem of my T-shirt with one hand and peeled my boxers down my thighs with the other.

I was of average size, so I wasn't nervous in that regard, but being so raw and exposed in front of another person—especially someone way out of my league who wasn't unaware of it either—had my knees feeling weak and wobbly.

"I knew you'd be a pretty boy," he said, his voice thick with want, smile salacious. "I'll bet you taste just as divine."

To my utter humiliation, my cock throbbed against my stomach and a bead of precum dribbled from the tip, right in front of his face. My cheeks burned, and the look he shot me through his lashes was smugger than I'd ever seen him. It was also all the warning I got before he leaned forward, took every inch of me into his hot, wet mouth, and swallowed.

I saw stars.

My head thumped against the wall as my back arched, a hoarse moan tearing from my throat. The feeling was indescribable—electric, molten. It took everything in me not to fist his horns and buck upward, to chase that silken heat and seek relief from the tension already coiling at the base of my spine.

How was something so simple, so good? All he did was bump his nose to my pelvis and hold me there, all of me filling him, the tip grazing the ridges on the roof of his mouth, and it was the best I'd ever felt. Of course, he went ahead and proved that declaration rash by humming around me, the vibrations sending an extra jolt of pleasure straight to my balls, and fuuuuck me .

Forget the fucking stars. I'd never considered myself a pious man, but I sure as shite saw the pearly gates.

Ash drew back with a filthy laugh to lap at the now dripping slit, and the dual pressures snaking around the head of my dick was how I learned that his tongue was forked. It should have been alarming, a reminder of exactly who — or what— was sucking me off. But the way each point twitched and licked had me barrelling towards orgasm far too quick, the sensation boiling in my core, and I was too focused on not blowing my load like the fucking virgin I was to care.

I'd barely had the chance to fully enjoy it, to savour what should have been a gradual build-up, a crawl not a race, and it was impossible to dial back.

Such an embarrassment.

My toes curled against the carpet, my muscles beginning to clench hard. It was too intense. Too much, too soon, emotion and pleasure swelling like a storm, and I couldn't regain control over any of it, couldn't calm the rise of anxiety, couldn't hush the whisper nipping at my ear...

You're not good enough.

"S-stop," I said, my voice cracking, panic setting in. "Stop, I can't... I..."

Ash withdrew instantly, taking his spit-slick mouth and skilled hands away without

hesitation, and I wanted to kick myself. I hated the cold air that hit my sensitive skin. I hated losing the warm suction of his lips.

But most of all, I hated how he stayed kneeling on the ground as he peered up at me, a furrow between his brows.

“Are you—”

“I’m sorry,” I cut in, scrambling to tug my boxers up, cringing as the fabric fused with my wet dick.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Before Ash could respond either in words or expression, I retreated into my room, eyes fixed on the floor. “I, er... I have to get ready for work.”

Ash rose to his feet without flair or fuss, and I closed the door instead of making eye contact, like a coward, not willing to risk spotting even a smidge of ridicule on his face. Several beats passed while I stared at nothing, willing my heart to quit thundering, overwhelmed with the urge to go after him, to try again, but knowing it was too late.

I’d already fucked up.

I leaned forward, resting my forehead against the wood, and let out a defeated sigh.

Bloody idiot.

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Chapter six

ISAAC

While the days passed in a mundane blur, each night I'd dreamt about Ash and his mouth and that robe he wore. That bloody robe . I'd seen him fully naked, but something about that silky fabric clinging to his body, showing only an outline of what lay underneath, was infinitely more erotic. I was like a Victorian gentleman being flashed an ankle. It was pathetic, and probably some sort of sign that I was woefully determined to ignore.

We hadn't talked about that morning—I got major second-hand embarrassment even thinking about it. After standing with my head against the bedroom door for a solid ten minutes, beating myself up, I'd had a perfunctory wank before getting on with my day. I had busied myself at work until the only energy left in my tank when I came home was for eating and going to bed.

Wash, rinse, repeat .

It wasn't that I'd actively tried to avoid talking about it. I was just exhausted and preoccupied, and yeah, okay, maybe a little reluctant to bring it up, but only because I didn't know what to say. Instead of making even more of a tit of myself, it was easier to keep my head down and focus every ounce of my attention on the shop.

Forgetting it had ever happened wasn't an option, unfortunately. The plethora of visions and phantom sensations that plagued me every night made that impossible. Thankfully, those could be brushed aside while going through the motions and

preparing myself for the crowds to flood through the doors.

Except that was delusional, and preparing for nothing only took an hour, so thinking about Ash often happened sooner than I liked.

Today, I'd turned to making bows in a last-ditch effort to stave off my daydreaming. I already had a pile pre-made in the back, but it was my go-to whenever my hands needed to be kept busy. It was a mindless task, using my thumb to glide the edge of the scissors over the tails of the ribbon until it sprang into a curl. It was oddly fun, and briefly distracted me from the fact that the shop was barren.

However, the green strip I'd subconsciously chosen reminded me of a certain belt on a certain dressing gown that I wanted to ignore, and that was how I found myself once again imagining my demon roommate on his knees.

The next ribbon curl was accompanied by a frustrated sigh .

I couldn't believe I'd fucking bailed. If Ash hadn't thought me a proper bellend before, he did now. Maybe that was why he hadn't tried again. He'd realised that all my baggage wasn't worth the aggravation, and had given up. The fact that he still acted like his regular ole inappropriate self didn't really contradict that theory. It was just how he was, I'd decided—foul-mouthed and sassy—so I had no way of knowing if the recent dip in persuasion was because he'd rescinded his offer or if he was giving me a break.

Either way, I was glad of the chance to process.

My entire life, every step of the way, people had doubted me. It made me hell-bent on proving them wrong, turned me into someone who refused to ask for help or rely on anyone. I was stubborn. A control freak. It felt like failure to need someone else, like it didn't count whenever the credit was shared, and for some reason, part of me

thought that giving in to Ash's terms meant giving up. Admitting to the world that I wasn't good enough to fix this on my own.

But that was ridiculous.

If anything, by accepting what was offered, the problem was still being solved by me. I'd be making the conscious decision to take the path that headed straight for success. All I needed was to reach out and meet someone halfway.

It was just hard to let go.

Glancing around the shop, my chest tightened at how quiet and empty it was—a far cry from what I had envisioned when the place first opened. It hadn't always been that way. Customers used to queue out the door, bringing in a decent and steady income, but like all good things, popularity had a sell-by date. More and more businesses had opened up in town, exciting new novelties that the folks' interests shifted to instead. There were now supermarkets with cheaper options—and maybe better ones, in some cases—alongside an increasing trend towards DIY.

The decline in revenue had been a gradual but noticeable one. People wanted to be wowed, to feel like what they were getting was unique and worth the investment, but the less they came, the less money I had to spare on inventory to convince them.

A vicious cycle.

I still had my regulars—their loyalty truly was touching—but even the odd wedding and funeral was barely enough to cover the bills, never mind profit and stock. I relied solely on my fast-dwindling savings, plus the cutting out of absolutely anything that leaned closer to a luxury than a necessity. It was no way to live, but the alternative was conceding to all those voices that had told me I couldn't do it.

Fuck that noise.

The most depressing part? Looking at the walls and floors, all they needed was a fresh lick of paint and maybe a new carpet. Simple adjustments that could return it to its former glory—and closer to what I'd wished the place would be—but I was too skint for any of it .

There was so much room for improvement, and none of it would have cost a fortune, but still more than I had. There could be a better layout that felt more welcoming, extra fairy lights above the door, trinkets and gifts that were actually on trend. Even just a bloody updated theme for the window display.

I wasn't exactly envisioning paradise!

Timed to a fucking tee, one of the teardrop lights hanging above that very same display flickered and popped. It set off a chain reaction, the rest of the bulbs in the circuit blowing, plunging that entire corner of the shop into darkness. I stared, unmoving for a moment, before a bitter laugh bubbled up in my throat and I dropped to my elbows on the counter.

My eyes stung, but unless my tears had turned to gold since the last time I'd cried, I refused to let them fall. It would make no difference. I couldn't afford repairs or upgrades or renovations, and sitting there blubbering wouldn't undo that. It was just frustrating beyond belief to know that I'd poured all I had into my dream, and if everything kept crumbling at this rate, it would all be for nothing.

Something desperately needed to change.

And I had a feeling it was going to have to be me .

I closed the shop an hour early, a habit I had picked up for days when customers were

extra scarce. I hadn't seen anyone since an older woman at lunchtime who'd wanted a dozen peony roses for her mother's birthday—her favourites, apparently. But they were no longer in season, so she'd left disappointed with a potted orchid under her arm instead.

It was a sale, at least.

After the last few months of a similar routine, I'd reached the conclusion that there was no use hanging around for a miracle or throwing money I didn't have at the electric man. There was only so much I could busy myself with when there were no orders to be filled, so leaving made sense. A note was always pinned to the door with my number should anyone turn up—I was only upstairs, after all—but they never did. At what point could it be considered a waste of paper?

With a sigh, I trudged up to my flat, hanging up my hoodie once inside. Ash was in his usual spot, lounging on the sofa, wearing that damned robe again. It was a little backward how a slip of fabric warranted more of my concern than any of his demon attributes but, in truth, those were easier to get used to. Or ignore. The robe, however, had my heart racing no matter how often he wore it.

Maybe it was cursed?

Ash had a different book in his lap from yesterday, one I didn't recognise by the cover alone. *How to Kill the Taxman and Get Away with It*, the title read. Yeah, circumstances considered, it definitely wasn't one of mine.

"Where are you pulling these books from?" I asked, coming to stand at the end of the couch, hands planted on my hips. "That wasn't on my shelf."

"No, it was hidden under your bed with your unopened sex toys and a demon-summoning how to."

I glared, but the blush spreading high on my cheeks no doubt ruined its heat. “Toy , singular.” I crossed my arms over my chest to seem intimidating. “And stop taking the piss.”

“Then stop asking ridiculous questions.” Finally, he peered up at me, but one pass over my stance had his eyebrow rising. I deflated, and his focus returned to the page. “You are back early, my dear.”

Huffing, I threw myself onto the empty side of the sofa, sagging into the cushions. “Well observed.”

I caught his small, amused smirk. “Bad day?”

“Nothing new.” I waved that off, breezing past the topic. “Do you even like reading? Or have you just got nothing better to do?”

“I could murder your neighbour.” His tone didn’t change, his response so easy it was as if he’d suggested a game of cards. “He is very inconsiderate. Mowing his pathetic lawn in the wee hours of the morning.”

I stared at him in disbelief, but he wasn’t in the least bit arsed. “Ten o’clock isn’t the wee hours ! And no, you can’t kill Kevin. He’s nice.”

He was also Moxie’s owner, the sweet little cat that hung around here. At least, I suspected he was. Her name was written on her collar, so I’d just assumed her address since she typically came sauntering over from that general direction. Regardless, it would break my heart to see her separated from him. Not that I was even dignifying Ash’s lunacy with a second thought.

Just saying.

“Then, no,” he said with a condescending half smile, “I do not have anything better to do than read. At present.”

I chewed the skin from my lip, a nasty habit I’d developed as a way to keep quiet. He’d warned me not to ask stupid questions, but there was something I had to clear up. “You didn’t steal that book, did you? Because I know the librarian, and she would have my guts for garters if she—”

Ash scoffed in offence. “What do you take me for?”

“Er... a demon with zero morals, who just brought up killing my neighbour for the offence of cutting his grass?”

He shrugged. “Fair enough. Though no, I did not steal it. I haven’t left your cosy little den since I got here.” His gaze lifted before he tacked on a nonchalant, “You haven’t permitted it.”

“What?” I felt my face pale. “I have to allow you outside the flat?”

“I am tied to you, my dear,” he said again, as if I’d somehow forgotten that part. “Even with your blessing, I cannot stray too far from you—or the place of my summoning—for long. But due to my immense power, I could venture out if and when you were not in need of me. Even if only to your neighbour’s garden and back.”

“You need to tell me this shit! I don’t know what I’m doing!” I lurched forward, gesturing wildly as I spoke. “What would’ve happened if I’d just said fuck this and skipped the country? I even went back to The Magic Shop without asking you to come with, and you didn’t say anything.”

Ash reacted to my frustration by closing his book, a finger slotted between the pages

to keep his place. I had his attention, at least.

“As I’ve said, I have to be beside you or in the vicinity of the summoning circle. There would have only been adverse effects if you’d taken me to this magic shop and left me there before ‘skipping the country.’ I’d have felt compelled to follow you, or withered out of existence had you ordered me to stay.”

My jaw dropped in horror. “Fuck, okay.” Why was summoning a demon such a fucking hassle? “Then, yes, you’re absolutely free to leave whenever you want, just... please don’t murder anyone. Or, you know, show my peers your demon form. If it can be helped.”

He dipped his head in a mockery of a bow. “Message received.”

“And, let me guess, it’ll be wilfully ignored?”

“Yes.”

I glowered at him, pointing an accusatory finger. “I mean it, behave yourself. I don’t need any more reason for people to avoid my shop. ”

He sniffed loftily and went back to reading. “I wouldn’t dream of getting caught, pet, so you have nothing to worry about.”

Huffing a laugh, I flopped into the cushions again, letting my eyes drift shut and my linked hands rest on my stomach. “Whatever you say.”

Silence fell between us.

For all of three seconds.

“So...” I cracked one eye open. “I can control you?”

Ash stilled, and it made me regret asking. “You can control my physical presence, to a degree. You can send me to the edge of our bond’s perimeters, and call me back whenever you are in need, but that is the extent of it.”

I had no way of knowing if he was telling the truth, but I doubted he’d have been forthcoming if there was even a chance that I had more power over him. Not that it mattered, either way. His being here was an accident, and I had absolutely no interest in having a thrall. “I have no desire or intention of controlling you, Ash,” I said, hoping to be reassuring. “Just to be clear.”

“You can’t,” he said with an air of superiority. “Your chivalry is moot.”

Well, that conversation was well and truly pied.

I blew out a slow breath, trying to relax, but for some reason, my insides felt twitchy, and I wasn’t in the mood for silence. “Not planning a nighttime haunt, then? Now that you’re a little freer. ”

He sent me a sidelong glance. “Is that your idea of a hint?”

“No? But since you’re no longer trapped here like you have been for the past week, are you not chomping at the bit to go out and stretch your legs?”

“I’m not a dog.”

I frowned. “Never said you were.”

He closed his eyes, breathed out, then faced me with a smile. “From now on, pet, let us assume I never do anything that I do not wish to be doing.” His tone was firm,

leaving no room for argument. “If I haven’t moved from this spot, it’s because I am content. If I wish to go elsewhere, believe me, I will.”

“Noted,” I said, and began gnawing at my lip again. Ash clocked it, his eyes dropping there for a moment before flicking up, understanding in his expression.

He sighed through his nose and set his book on the coffee table.

“You are in a very chatty mood this evening—not a complaint,” he added pointedly, cutting off my impending apology. “It makes a change from the good morning and good night that you’ve been subjecting me to of late.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “Yeah, sorry about that. It wasn’t intentional. I’m just tired and not used to company.”

“I see. So, it has nothing to do with our fleeting tryst?”

Of course he’d see right through my bullshit excuse—which wasn’t even entirely bullshit, just half bullshit. Still, I tried to keep up pretences. “Er, no?”

He gave me a look that said he didn’t believe me .

No surprise there.

“Okay, fine. It was partly to do with our... with that .”

“Anything specific?”

“I was embarrassed, and I needed time to process,” I admitted, honestly, staring at my hands and seeing no more point in lying. “I am sorry. Both for running off like that and avoiding you afterwards.”

“Apologies are unnecessary,” Ash said with a flippant hand gesture. “It was my intention to take you out of your comfort zone, maybe even test the limits of your boundaries—I am a demon, after all—but there was never a goal to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t, I just...” I trailed off, my shoulders sagging on an exhale. Talking about shit on a personal level always had me wanting to clam up. It made me feel weak and helpless, but I’d come this far.

May as well lay the rest of my cards on the table.

“When I start to lose control, I get lost in my own head. I’m not used to accepting help—I feel like a failure for it. Plus, I’ve never done this before, and I don’t...”

“You don’t?”

I sighed. “I didn’t want to be a disappointment.”

Ash’s eyes drilled into me like lasers. I prayed for the ground to open up and swallow me whole. “Pet—”

A self-deprecating laugh burst out of my throat before he could even attempt to console or pity me. “I mean, you barely put your mouth on my dick and I was on a hair’s trigger. It’s mortifying. Especially with someone as hot as you. It’s a lot of pressure. And I know how stupid that sounds, I do, but I just... I have a lot going on.”

“I know you are a virgin,” he said, unbothered, making me feel, once again, too transparent. “I knew that before propositioning you.”

I wanted to ask if it was really that obvious, but recalling my fumble was all the answer I needed. “And you don’t mind?”

“On the contrary,” he purred, draping himself over his corner of the couch, arms stretched out. “I do enjoy the occasional deflowering.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let me guess, you get off on dirtying the innocent?”

“It is rather riveting.” He dropped his voice even lower, its rich tone like honeyed silk. “Being the first to map out your skin with my fingers and tongue, to seize your sighs and moans. The way you’ll look at me like I’ve given you the entire world on a silver plate. Yes, that’ll be riveting indeed.”

A bead of sweat gathered at my nape. “But you could have anyone else.”

“Yes, and I want you .” He said the words with such certainty, his face showing no signs of mischief, that it derailed me a tad and made me wonder what I was even dithering for. But it was only brief. His natural smarm and flirtiness returned post-haste. “And since you are in need of my assistance, it would kill two birds, as they say. A mutual arrangement for mutual benefit. We both get what we want, and have fun in the process.”

“But it feels like I get the better end of the deal.” I shrugged. “Sex with you and help with my business.”

“You sell yourself short, pet.” He raked his gaze over the whole of me, leering. “I assure you, I am very, very content with the terms. I would have asked for a higher price for my services, otherwise. Your firstborn, perhaps.”

I scoffed at the not-so-subtle nod to our first meeting, wondering if, in hindsight, that option would have been any easier.

“You also needn’t worry yourself about my virtue,” he added as if sensing my doubts. Not that his virtue , or lack thereof, was being disputed, but the matter of his free will

was. “I’m quite capable of knowing what I want.”

I’d admit, it was my second biggest hang-up. The guilt for not only trapping him here without prior knowledge of the true implications, but also having to use him for my benefit. Hearing how sure and eager he was did make me feel marginally less like a twat, though. I’d probably still feel ashamed for being the reason he couldn’t leave until he actually could, but since the only solution to that was biting the bullet and getting the ball rolling, why not just do it?

It was a no-brainer, really. I’d know that I’d done everything to save my business, and he’d be free to go home sooner.

Win-win .

Before I could end my silence with either acceptance or rejection, Ash chimed in. “Do you not wish to be intimate with another? Is that why you stall?”

“Huh? Of course I do,” I said, maybe a bit too defensively.

The demon shrugged, unperturbed. “I have a brother who does not care for the act, therefore, does not participate. He finds his pleasures elsewhere—in battle, for example. I wondered if you were of the same inclination.”

“Oh.” Understanding dawned on me. “No, I have the desire, it’s just never been at the top of my agenda. I’m definitely not into battling anyone.”

“We all have our hobbies.” He smirked. “But I wouldn’t wish to keep tempting you into something that you have no interest in being tempted into. Your body may be tuned in to the act, but if your mind is not, it would be a fruitless endeavour. I only persist as every time our eyes meet, it’s as if you want to devour me... or be devoured.” I felt my cheeks heat. Was that true? “I react to the energy I’m given, pet,

but if you truly wish for me to desist, I shall. We can live in immaculate harmony; it would make no difference to me.”

“That’s...” I scoffed lightly. “Mighty moral of you.”

“What can I say? I like my pets drooling for me.” Now there was a visual, and probably not far off what I’d been doing with his lips wrapped around my cock. He smirked again. “Disinterest is, after all, very disinteresting.”

“Well, my inexperience has nothing to do with me not wanting it, trust me.” I huffed a short laugh. “Growing up in a really nosy household put me off trying with anyone when I was younger, and I saw no point in sneaking around—the town’s way too tight-knit for that. Then, by the time college ended, I was so invested in floristry and opening the shop that months turned into years, and suddenly, I’m a twenty-eight-year-old virgin who’s only dated”—using the term loosely—“a handful of people. It’s just how it worked out.”

He nodded in acknowledgement. “Then...?”

It was a prompt, a final effort to know where I stood with him. With his advances. “I... I don’t want you to stop,” I heard myself admit, and though the somewhat impulsiveness of it startled me, it was the truth.

I’d given myself a chance to think. I’d looked at the evidence through defeated eyes and realised I had backed myself so far into a corner that I couldn’t pretend everything would sort itself out anymore. No matter what I did or how hard I worked myself sick, my tenacity wasn’t enough. I needed help. Pride, spite, and stubbornness had forced me to cling on, but for what? All it did was kill every last bit of hope I’d had, knock my confidence to the floor, and damage my life so irrevocably that I needed to make a deal with a literal demon to save it.

It was disheartening to learn I'd fallen so deep into a hole that only fairy tales and magic spells could drag me back to the surface, but as long as Wayne didn't find out, I was safe from the 'I told you so.'

Probably .

"I want you, and I want your help," I said with more conviction, gazing up at him to show my sincerity. "I just... I don't know what I'm doing."

Ash studied me for a moment, his fierce eyes boring into my soul. It was unnerving, but also had my belly heating in ways it probably shouldn't have, which must have been his intention as his expression turned predatory.

He reached for a tumbler I hadn't noticed on the side table, two fingers of amber liquid in the bottom, and took a slow sip. "Well, luckily, I do."

"Lucky," I said intelligently, my mouth hanging agape as I stared at his Adam's apple bobbing on a swallow. How could he make something as simple as drinking look so... sexy? I didn't even like whisky, it just sat in the cabinet for whenever my dad decided to come over, but I craved it now.

I'd have downed the whole bottle if Ash had offered it to me.

"You look positively parched, my dear." He slid the forked tip of his dexterous tongue across his bottom lip, presumably to taunt me.

"You found my drinks cupboard, I see."

"Human spirits cannot get me drunk, but it does burn nicely in my throat." He offered me the glass. "Would you like a taste?"

He was a tenant inside my head, I was sure of it.

I nodded, but instead of handing over the drink like I'd expected, Ash took another sip, holding it in his mouth as he moved closer. With all the care of a lover's caress, he tilted my chin, used his thumb to pry my lips apart, then kissed me. My breath hitched, and my heart may have skipped a beat or two.

The whisky felt like acid on my tongue, searing a trail down my throat as I swallowed, but it was worth it to feel his soft lips, to hear him moan against me. It sent sparks from my ears straight down to my toes, freezing me in place.

It wasn't my first kiss, but it was by far the hottest.

Ash knotted his fingers in the long hair at my crown, keeping my head pinned at an angle as his tongue—the split tips that I remembered curling around my cock—flicked past my teeth in exploration. Whisky trickled from the corner of my mouth, and he paused long enough to catch it, not wasting a single drop of the sweet, smoky nectar, before diving back in with a pleased hum.

I may have held my breath for however long it lasted, unwilling to part even for air. The warmth, the closeness, the thrill, all of it was consuming me, making everything that wasn't us fade into the background. It was bliss, a peace settling in my head, in my bones, that I hadn't known for months. If this was how it felt to kiss him, what would it be like to have more?

I wanted to find out.

As if sensing it—and deciding to be the wilful arse that he was—Ash withdrew, reclining at the far end of the sofa again, leaving me panting and disgruntled. He sprawled out like a contented cat, undoing his robe with a calculated flick, and basked for my viewing pleasure, a smirk firm on his face. He knew he looked good, and

normally I'd have rolled my eyes at his antics, but with a glance downward, I understood his arrogance.

Sulk forgotten, my eyes widened, mouth watering at the sight of forest-green lingerie against miles of gorgeously sleek, dark skin and lightly-toned muscle. A bralette covered his pecs, nipples pebbling under the lacy fabric, as if tempting me to bite them. The outline of his cock was visible through the knickers, not yet hard, but jerking with the attention.

Whereas my dick was perked high, my dropped jaw almost smacking the tip.

"I like that look on you." His voice was pitched low, smooth as honey. "All heart-eyes and tongue lolling on the floor. Very flattering."

Before I could defend myself, he spread his legs a little more and the robe slid off his thighs, revealing frilly green garters.

Fucking hell.

"Jesus Christ," I choked out on an unsteady breath, my eyes fixed on how those innocuous slips of fabric bunched around the supple skin that I wanted to bury my face in.

And mark with my teeth.

"Not quite, pet." He grinned, smug and shark-like. "But I can be your saviour, if you wish me to be."

I swallowed thickly, my hands tightening into fists in my lap with the uncertainty of what to do next. My gaze roved from the arch of his horns, to his neck, graceful and slender, all the way down to his toes, lingering on each detail and contour along the

path before darting up again. I'd already seen him naked, but this felt different. Kinkier . I was in overdrive. So many fantasies were whirring through my head that it stalled me. I wanted to touch everything, to worship, to make him feel as good as he'd made me feel the other morning, but I didn't know how.

I didn't know if I could .

Perceptive as ever, Ash seemed to understand my hesitation, his smile softening at the edges. He didn't mock my inexperience, didn't show any impatience about my nerves or lack of confidence, he just slid a foot towards me, snaking it between my legs and pressing against the growing bulge in my pants. I moaned, eyes shuttering and hips shifting towards the pressure.

My thoughts scattered.

"Is this all for me?" he purred, gently stroking my clothed prick as I clenched my fists even tighter as an anchor to keep myself from doubling over. "Such a good little creature, aren't you? So polite and eager to please. You want me so badly, don't you, petal?"

I nodded dumbly, biting my lip to stifle the whine building in my throat.

I was no dog, but I sure as shit would bark if he asked.

Ash swept a hand over his body in a pointed gesture. "You can have me. In whatever way you'd like. Don't be shy. I'll give you anything you desire. "

I barely resisted the urge to pounce on him like a horny animal, but I managed, determined to do everything in my power not to put him off or make myself look like a complete novice as before. There was so much I wanted to do to him, so many places I ached to explore until he shivered and cried with pleasure, but it was difficult

to choose what to do first.

Best to start slow.

“Can I—” I cleared my throat. “Can you kiss me again?”

His smug grin returned, and my skin tingled at the memory of how those lips had felt wrapped around my dick. “So precious.”

Rising from his sprawl, he crawled towards me, eyes filled with lust and fangs bared in a devious grin. He paused at my knees, slowly extending a hand as if to pry them apart, but instead—with more strength than any being should have had in one arm—he grabbed my ankle and jerked me flat onto my back.

I sucked in a sharp breath as he straddled my lap, my hands finding his hips and flexing at the first touch of soft skin. It made me keen—a pathetic noise that shouldn’t have left my throat, but couldn’t be smothered. It was my first time exploring another person’s body, and he was so silky smooth under my fingertips, and strong . No doubt he was strong enough to crush me between his thighs, and why in the ever-loving hell did that make my cock twitch?

I guessed I had found my type. Or my first kink .

My reaction amused Ash, like everything I did seemed to. But it clearly didn’t turn him off as he leaned down to brush his lips over mine, teasing me, before giving me exactly what I’d asked for. He didn’t bother with slow, not this time. He cupped my flushed cheeks, keeping me in place as his forked tongue licked into my mouth and staked its claim. It took a beat or two for me to catch up, to get onboard with the pace and match his skilled dance, but when I did, it instantly refuelled my desire.

The sweet smokiness of whisky still lingered, subtle, and now mixed with his own

essence. It would be my drink of choice. I got greedy for it, pawing at Ash to pull him closer, wordlessly begging to be kissed harder, to drown in his taste. He shifted forward, indulging my neediness, but instead of soothing the ache, it brought my focus to a situation even more urgent.

His arousal grazed mine, and though the thick fabric of my jeans would rub me raw, it felt good. Mind-numbingly good. My whole body lit up, and I arched against him with a hiss, seeking more of that pressure. The infernal creature just grinned wide and captured my lips once more, his hips rolling with purpose as his tongue fucked me deeper. Dual stimulation. I tried to meet his rhythm, to be somewhat coordinated instead of just rutting against him with blind need, but awkward clumsiness seemed to be my body's natural language .

Still, it was better than anything I'd ever felt, miles above my own hand, and second only to his mouth—though, this was somehow more intimate—and I didn't want it to ever end.

Until I felt the telltale signs of orgasm clawing at my core, hot and consuming, and I sank into my head again. I wasn't in control, and a nip of panic and self-doubt began worming its way through the overwhelming pleasure, threatening to ruin everything.

Ash must have sensed it, must have caught me drifting away, because he seized my chin, yanking me back from my straying thoughts.

"Focus on me, pet," he demanded with a rough grind of his hips. "You have already impressed me, or I would have killed you already."

"Comforting," I deadpanned, only to groan.

"You don't need to be in control of it all," he said, voice low and commanding. "Let me give you what you need."

Letting go did not come naturally to me. It was like flaying open my chest and removing the parts that made me function, but despite his unknown, possibly heinous intentions, I trusted Ash to keep me grounded. To slot the pieces back into place when he was done. Putting myself at the mercy of a demon in my most defenceless state was not my smartest move, but when it came to losing my virginity, would there ever be a more capable pair of hands?

No half measures .

Before I lost my nerve, I nodded, and his answering grin was oddly soft. “Good,” he said, setting his hands over mine and guiding them up to his chest. The feel of silk and lace under my fingertips made my skin tingle. “Now, touch me.” He brushed his thumb over my knuckles, a teasing edge to his smile. “Worship me as I know you so desperately want to.”

With another nod, I followed his instruction, squeezing and pawing at him with absolutely no finesse, but he seemed pleased. His own hands wandered as well, metal claws scratching lightly at the centre of my chest as he effortlessly unbuttoned my shirt. His fingers splayed over the now bare skin, squeezing the softer areas around my waist before following the path of my ribs up towards my pecs.

He brushed his thumbs over my nipples, pouting when he didn’t get the reaction he’d obviously hoped for.

“Hm, I suppose we’ll have to train them into sensitivity.”

I swallowed hard. “I-I can feel it. I’m just a little— ngh —preoccupied.” Trying not to come in my jeans like a teenager, went unsaid.

He hummed and tried again, but instead of another feather-like touch, he set the tips of his metal claws against each bud and pinched. Hard. It stung like a bitch, and pain

shot through my nerves like fireworks, but it made everything feel that much more intense. Heightened. My hands dropped to his thighs, fingers digging in as I rutted up, mindlessly seeking friction.

It made him chuckle .

“There we are.”

Clearly content with my responsiveness, Ash moved his hands to my waistband, making quick work of undoing the button and zipper. For a split second, he propped up on his knees, making me thrust against air as he shimmied my jeans and briefs out of the way. It was so fast and fluid—quite obviously magic—that I barely had the chance to miss his warm body against me, or prepare for the rush of new feeling when he lowered himself again.

My bare prick, oversensitive and leaking, slid over the bulge in his knickers, the thin, silky fabric doing nothing to stifle the heat or conceal the shape of him. Or help me ignore the fact that this was actually fucking happening.

That someone was actually touching me.

Release crept up so suddenly it was disorientating, but unlike the first time, I welcomed it. My hands scrambled for firmer purchase against Ash’s hips. I clung to him like a lifeline, frantically tugging and bucking as our gazes met, tears pricking the edges of my vision. “Please, don’t stop. I’m gonna...”

“Do it,” he said, eyes flashing as he planted his hands on my pecs—leverage to ride me properly. “Be a good pet and give me your cum.”

Even if I’d wanted to, I couldn’t have stopped how my muscles locked and I came with a choked sob, spilling hot, sticky ropes over my chest and belly.

And Ash's hands .

“ Shit, fuck ,” I gasped, shuddering as liquid pleasure coursed through me. “I’m sorry. I’m so—”

“Shhh, petal.” He rocked against me still, drawing out the sensations as he brought his fingers to his mouth to lick them clean. “Mm, you are even more delicious than I’d hoped.”

There was nothing I could say to that, so I just stared in blissed-out but still-kind-of-horny awe as his forked tongue lapped up every last drop. It was filthy, lewd, and obscene, and I struggled to string together a coherent thought as my brain apparently dribbled straight out through my dick.

Slumping back, I let the soft couch cushions cradle my head and my eyes drift shut for a moment, catching my breath.

“You’re in lingerie,” I said once I’d calmed, my voice barely a murmur, more of a personal reassurance than an observation. “It’s hot as fuck, so I think I can be forgiven.”

“Correct on all three counts,” he said, his arrogance evident, and I huffed a laugh.

“Modest, too. No wonder I lasted thirty seconds.”

“Generous, but it’s no matter. You are young, and we have time.” He kissed the tip of my nose before standing and offering me a hand. “In fact, why don’t we take a shower and try again? In a bed this time.”

I was pretty sure he’d breezed past an insult there, but I was too drained and floaty to give two shits. I nodded dumbly, and let him lead me to the bathroom without

hesitation.

At that point, if he'd asked for my soul, I'd have dropped to my knees and begged him to take it.

I was truly fucked.

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Chapter seven

AMADEUS

The human's inexperience was intoxicating, and his inclination towards obedience even more so. His pretty cock hadn't flagged since the moment I'd plastered my body against his in the shower, telling him to be patient as I washed and teased every inch of his freckled skin. I'd whispered how sweet he was for me, waiting and eager, and he'd mewled as I trailed the washcloth over his hip, so close to where he desperately ached for it.

But like a good little pet, he controlled himself, knowing I refused to let his seed be wasted a second time.

I'd used my magic to dry us off, too hungry to feel him inside me to let it happen naturally. We'd already migrated to his bedroom, the floors suspiciously less messy than they had been before. I smirked against his mouth and cupped his cheeks. His avid desire to impress fuelled me, my tongue coiling and constricting around his like a snake as I guided us towards the bed. He made the most deliciously startled noise when I shoved him onto the mattress, his fingers tangling the sheets, the scent of his arousal growing stronger in my nose.

There was a moment when he just stared up at me, lips parted and spit-slick, but then he blinked out of the lust-filled trance to bounce against the bed again, a knot of confusion settling between his brows.

"Did you... This isn't my bed."

Landing on my hands and knees, I crawled over him, hoping my nakedness and the sultry look in my eyes would be distraction enough. “I don’t know what you mean, pet.”

He rudely swerved to avoid my kiss, glaring up at me instead. “Yes, you do.”

I huffed and rose onto my knees to straddle him, crossing my arms over my chest. “I was not getting fucked on that wretched thing. It was lumpy.”

After a pause, during which his lips thinned to hide his amusement, he snorted. It sounded rather fond. “You’re such high maintenance,” he said teasingly, a side of him that I hadn’t seen before but wanted more of. “Should I call you Princess?”

“Not if you wish to come again,” I retorted, delighted with the genuine laugh it caused, and the kiss he dragged me back down for.

My human proved a quick study. His kisses, once sloppy, were now thorough and dirty, and his hands no longer fumbled, but were firm and deliberate. It thrilled me to no end that he could be moulded so easily, taught how best to please me, and transformed into the perfect little plaything .

It was curious, but this creature stirred an unfamiliar feeling in my chest that I was unsure what to do with, a desire already stronger than any I’d ever known. I wanted to ruin him. To have my fun as intended, then leave him shattered on the floor, relying on me to put the pieces back together, only to be denied.

But that was not all.

I wanted to be attentive, build him up from the ground, and bring out all that I could sense he was capable of. He was not a delicate flower, but precious, all the same. A rare breed within the bunch. It was unheard of for a human—or any other lesser

being—not to instantly buckle under my charms, but to my surprise, he'd fought against the tug, stringing me along until he was certain of his own mind. It was commendable, and made me even more determined to have him. Like a beast gnawing at the bars of its cage to be let out, hungry to finally devour its prey.

A laughable reaction, to be sure.

Had I really been so deprived of a worthy distraction that even the slightest whiff of a challenge had me foaming at the mouth? Had my hunt for an exciting new endeavour starved me entirely of sense?

Regardless, sentimentality had no place in a demon's repertoire, so I banished those thoughts and focused on my prize.

Musing could wait until after I'd covered his belly in my cum .

"You are delicious," I purred, laving my tongue across his jawline. "I cannot wait to have you begging."

Isaac moaned, his back arching, his body acting of its own volition and seeking friction. I pandered to him, planting my hands on his chest to grind our lengths together, sighing happily at the feeling of his hardness twitching and dripping, proof of his eagerness. His hands moved to my arse, squeezing as if to encourage my movements. He was a greedy little thing, a creature after my own heart, and I found myself spurning the idea of wasting time on preparation.

With a flick of my wrist, my hole was slick and ready for him to be buried deep inside. There would be plenty of chances to feel the human's fingers stretching me open, but after several tedious days of waiting to get my way, my patience was all but gone.

“Are you sure you want me, petal?” I asked, reaching to notch the tip of his cock against my hole, tormenting him with how wet it was. “Want me to ride you until you’re calling my name as sweetly as you curse to God?”

Isaac nodded dumbly, the poor creature not knowing where to look. “Yes.”

That was all the approval I needed to finally lower myself onto him, inch by glorious inch. My head fell back, eyes closing and mouth parting with an indulgent smile as my arse connected with his thighs.

The feeling of being full was one I had so dearly missed, and I wished to savour it.

For a moment, at least.

“Fuuuuck,” Isaac said through his gritted teeth, his scent a blend of hysteria and lust. “You’re so... It feels so tight. I’m not gonna last, and I’m babbling. Oh, bloody fucking hell, I can’t...”

“Flatterer,” I teased, and when I looked down, his eyes were screwed shut, his muscles tensed.

“Seriously, this is what it feels like? I’ve been missing so much. Holy shit, holy shit, holy—” He cut himself off with a whine, digging his fingers into my hips as I clenched around him. “If you do that, I’ll come, I swear.”

With a chuckle, I lifted up, intent on readjusting, but the human panicked, eyes shooting open. “No, no, I’m sorry! Don’t leave. I’ll shut up.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” I said sternly as I hovered with the tip barely inside. “I find your pointless chatter endearing, but I do wish to come tonight, so I’m going to give you a little assistance.”

There was a buzz of magic in the air, and the human jolted with a hiss, his gaze zeroing in on the base of his cock, where a tight golden ring now sat.

“What... what’s that?”

“A cock ring. It’ll make you last until I’m ready for you to fill me. Any objections?”

He shifted in place, but otherwise didn’t refuse. “Feels weird, but no. ”

“Good to hear.” I slammed back down, the slap of skin almost as satisfying as the human’s cry of pleasure.

“Fucking hell!”

I smirked, leaning in to brush my nose against his. “Indeed you are, my dear.”

Each roll of my hips thereafter seemed to drive the human wild. He was awkward, at first, tentative with his thrusts. But once he planted his feet for leverage, instinct and desperation took over, and his need to please was obvious in the way he watched my reactions. I combed my metal-tipped fingers through the bouncy blond curls on top of his head, tugging harshly until he whimpered and his cock jerked inside me. The angle of his neck made it easier for me to lick a broad stripe over the pulsing vein and nip at his chin, indulging the barest hint of masochism I’d discovered.

“You feel so good, pet.” I moaned as a particularly hard buck nailed my sweet spot. “You’re going to make me come without even touching myself.”

In truth, he had a lot still to learn, but the image of him underneath me—groaning, his eyes pleading—more than made up for his lack of skill. He was everything I’d imagined he’d be: malleable, eager, a deliriously sweet fruit just ripe for picking. It was exactly what I’d needed: a soul to debauch and guide, something to make mine

that wasn't already.

The perfect entertainment.

It wasn't long at all before my skin started to tingle, that familiar heat roaring in the pit of my stomach. Normally, it would last longer, be drawn out until my thighs burned and my pet was babbling reverent nonsense.

But alas, we were both too riled up, and if the little creature chewed his lip any harder it'd be a gory mess.

"Please, Ash," he whined, his voice like music to my ears. Tears even glittered in his pretty blue eyes. It was utterly glorious. "Please, it's too much, I can't..."

"Oh, you poor thing," I cooed, distracting him from the hitch in my voice by circling my hips and clamping down, making his eyes roll and shoulders shake. "Lucky for you, I'm in a merciful mood."

With a thought, I snapped the restraint around his cock, and his grip turned bruising. He pounded up into me like a beast possessed, chasing his orgasm, his body wound so tight it was a wonder he didn't combust.

"Yes, that's it! Give it to me," I groaned, fangs bared. "Fill me up!"

The human came with a sob, his nails biting into my skin, his whole body a trembling arch. I wanted to watch him fall apart, to commit to memory how thoroughly I'd wrecked him, but my vision blazed with fire and my flesh prickled with heat, my full demon form clawing under the surface at the same moment as my release barrelled through me.

I let it filter in, just enough for my senses to heighten and the pleasure to become an

almost overwhelming buzz in my veins. It was a rush, an intense hit of adrenaline and power that begged to be unleashed, but I managed to keep it somewhat under control—there would be no benefit in oversharing my vulnerabilities.

A needling wave of fiery feathers sprouted over my back, collarbones, and thighs. It wasn't nearly as freeing as it would feel to unfurl my wings, but it was good, nonetheless. There was a brief moment of euphoria, the entire plane of existence narrowing to nothing except myself and the human tied to me. The erratic beat of his heart echoed in my ears, his scent surrounded me like a cloud of the finest, most addictive perfume, and I felt full in ways I couldn't explain.

The haze broke when Isaac's breath caught. His cock twitched valiantly once more, and I placed my hands on the bed beside his head, breathing through the aftershocks.

The human was panting, staring up at me, transfixed. "You have feathers?" he said, sounding mystified. "They're beautiful. Can I... can I touch them?"

The request was an innocent one, but made my skin crawl all the same. I would have considered it had my nerves not been so raw and the act itself not a little too intimate.

The hopeful look in his eyes, the curiosity, would get him anything, I feared.

"I am a little sensitive right now, pet, but I promise I'll let you touch them to your heart's content another time."

He was disappointed, of course, but nodded in understanding and took to smoothing his hands over my knees instead as if to comfort me—really the most darling little creature .

I rescinded my shift and lay down beside him, letting his soft cock slip free. Neither of us spoke, the human clearly satisfied with basking in the hot and heady afterglow,

and I, graciously, hadn't the urge to spoil it yet. It was his first time, after all, and there was no doubt some reflection to be had.

I supposed he deserved to do it in peace.

However, I regretted my lack of interest in mischief almost immediately as the silence allowed the thoughts from earlier to creep in. I had expected the usual detachment to happen, the 'that was thrilling, but I'm bored again' sensation to occur, but it didn't. I felt good in his presence, sated, and it was—to put it lightly—rather confusing.

I had thought taking the creature's virginity would be a bit of long overdue fun, but lying there, watching his chest rise and fall, sensing the calmness washing over him that I suspected he hadn't known for a long time, felt different. I felt greedy, as if I could have him over and over again and never grow tired of it.

I wanted him to know more of that tranquillity and ease, and be the reason for it.

It was... strange.

It was no secret that the human was drowning in self-loathing—a typically hilarious sight from my perspective. His confidence was nearly non-existent, and the fear of failure his constant companion. Since my arrival, I'd caught mere glimpses of his true personality. His wit, his creativity, his persistence. All bewitching qualities, but because of the rut he was stuck in, they were all buried deep under misery and hopelessness. He needed to be dragged out of that pitiful hole, nurtured until his spark returned with force.

For reasons I was not yet privy to, the more I dwelt on it, the more attractive the idea of being the one to do it was. There had to be a hidden agenda in there of some kind, as nothing benevolent was done without the promise of personal gain, but

nevertheless, I craved to see this wondrous creature heal and grow and be content.

In fact, the sadness I'd once found tantalising in its promise of entertainment was now acidic on my tongue.

"So, is that it?" Isaac's voice drew me from my musings, his gaze fixed to the ceiling. "Are you free to leave now? Is the bond gone?"

"Careful, pet..." I shifted closer, playfully trailing a finger over his belly, the mess I'd left disappearing. "One might get a complex being cast out from your bed so soon without even a word of praise."

He looked at me, wide eyed with worry. "That's not—this was amazing, I just—"

"I'm only teasing you, my dear." I kissed his pec in apology. "To answer your question... Not yet. But now, I can help you. Remember, I'm here until you are satisfied."

"I'm very satisfied."

"As am I," I purred, watching his cheeks bloom redder. "But it's deeper than lust, pet. You'll know when your wishes have been granted. When your soul is full of whatever it is you seek. "

There was a pause, probably for contemplation, before he hummed and folded one of his arms behind his head. He curled the other around my back, pinning me tighter against him. I felt him twirling the ends of my hair idly through his fingers, and surprisingly, I didn't want to fight it.

"Maybe we should get to know each other then?" he said, and I narrowed my eyes in suspicion.

“Why?”

“I want to know more about you,” he said with a shrug, and it was so authentic that after a quick internal debate and a shimmy to get more comfortable, I nodded for him to continue. “Okay, er... Have you done this before? Assisted humans with their hopes and dreams, I mean.”

“No, you are my first.” I fluttered my lashes exaggeratedly, making him huff. “In fact, it was a surprise that I was transported here at all. We have people for this type of thing: demons dedicated to fulfilling the desires of humans who unknowingly cast a summons. But your magician must’ve sensed your need for more than just a low-grade demon. You needed me , specifically, and though I am unsure why—” I lowered my voice to a purr. “It would be thrilling to find out.”

Ignoring my flirtatiousness, he moved on. Spoilsport . “Where are you from?”

“I believe you already know the answer to that.”

“Hell?”

“A version of it, yes.”

“What’s it like?” he asked, genuinely curious. “ Your home?”

“Hot,” I joked, fully anticipating the eye roll that followed. In truth, it was difficult to describe, especially to a human. Not because of the otherworldly sense of wealth and grandeur, or the thrum of magic that drifted constantly in the air, but home for a demon didn’t mean the same as it seemed to for mortals. They had more romantic or sentimental connotations for the word, whereas, for us, it was merely a place we resided, ruled over, and nothing more.

My manor held no deeper attachments for me other than strictly material, or as a symbol of power, though I doubted that was what the little creature wanted to hear.

Never let it be said that I hadn't strived to humour his inquisition.

"It's decadent," I finally said, tone turning wistful. For effect. "My manor itself is the grandest display of architecture, to be sure. It was built from gold and marble with pillars of quartz, and it stands on a colossal hill overlooking the iridescent river used to ferry souls to their judgement."

The human stiffened under me. "Sounds, er, wonderful."

"You did ask, pet."

"Yeah, I know, but..." He cleared his throat. "Was it not depressing?"

"On the contrary, I found it rather peaceful. There was nothing quite like lounging on my balcony with a good book, the white noise of all those bloodcurdling screams of despair playing in the background. They really are—"

"Alright, alright. Forget I asked." I let out a soft snort at his unease, though he clearly wasn't put off enough to abandon his questioning. "You mentioned a brother before. Do you only have the one?"

"I have five brothers and six sisters."

His eyes widened. "Holy shit. That's... a lot."

"Hm. Growing up, it was rather crowded for a time, I'll admit." The distant memories of us all inhabiting the same palace halls, learning our places, and vying for the attention of our father were not particularly welcome ones. "But as we came of age,

we were granted our own estates to manage, and it wasn't as suffocating. In fact, our familial bonds possibly saw improvement because of it. Marginally . We would still destroy one another if the need arose."

"You weren't close with any of them in particular?"

"No," I said, honestly, shrugging at his sympathetic frown. "It is what it is, my dear. Though, credit where it is due, Amara threw the best parties, so I did frequent her manor more than the others. Shame I'll miss her next one."

Isaac wilted, his eyes dropping. "And that's my fault."

I tapped the underside of his chin, bringing his gaze to mine again. "None of that, pet. I am enjoying myself here more than I expected. A great deal more than I would at any party—even one with an arena for... wrestling." My insinuation startled an exasperated huff out of him. "Besides, my years come slower than yours. I could be by your side until the end of your days, and only a fraction of time will have passed in my realm. "

"So, this could be like a holiday for you?"

I smiled at his comparison, and the hopeful look in his eye. "Yes."

Without a sign of nervousness, he slid his arm out from under his head and reached over to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear before resuming his position. The touch was soft enough to make me falter.

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm sorry," he said. "I should have questioned the shopkeeper more, but I honestly didn't expect the spell to work. I thought he was just a really good actor in a novelty shop."

I snorted. “Yes, perhaps you should have been slightly more inquisitive, but you are not at fault. This shopkeeper should have warned you of the consequences.”

“So you don’t hate me?”

“I have no reason to. You are a wonderful little thing,” I said honestly, swaying forward to press a kiss to his jaw. “I am quite fond of you.”

The smallest smile ticked at the corner of his lip, but I felt his elation seeping through the tie in our chest, giving away his true feelings.

I rested my head on his ribs, facing away so he couldn’t see my look of pride.

The next morning, the human received a letter of acceptance into his flower contest. There were tears, there was the ever-lingering scent of nerves, but above it all was pure, unfiltered joy. The cheek-dimpling smile that split his face was brighter than any I’d ever seen.

And why did that make my cold heart skip?

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Chapter eight

ISAAC

It was kinda mental how quickly a month passed when we were elbow deep in contest prep.

Amongst other things.

The most shocking part? I wasn't panicking. Not every day, at least. Obviously, as it drew closer and the reality sank in more and more, the idea of being in front of so many people, showing off my craft, had me bricking myself. But only a reasonable amount. I was mostly excited or too distracted to sit down and think about it.

Ash was to thank for that.

Whenever I wasn't working, we were fucking, and when we weren't doing either, we slept in the same bed because Ash was, surprisingly, a cuddler and refused to sleep on the single bed in the spare room. My bed was comfier and easier for five a.m. wake-up blow jobs, he'd said, and I couldn't disagree.

Our situation was a complex one, and if I had to label it, we were in the realm of fuck buddies, probably. But spending time with him, whether we were having sex, or bickering because he'd tried to poison my neighbour, and replaced all my clothes with fashionable alternatives, it was like a constant wave of dopamine.

It was partly to do with our 'deal' and the benefits he'd offered up, but still. He made

me feel wanted, and sexy, and it was addictive—a boost to my ego, to be sure. Being in a constant state of satisfaction also caused a domino effect. I didn't have time to dwell on my failures, and if I wasn't dwelling on my failures, I wasn't... failing? It was bonkers, and I could hardly make sense of it, but since that first night sleeping with Ash, there hadn't been nearly as many disasters.

I hadn't had an anxiety attack in weeks, and I felt... good. Clear-headed and calm. I laughed more with him around. Even Wayne had made a comment about it when we'd last met, and that was progress in itself. Ash's presence here seemingly had everything falling into place. He'd come into my life at exactly the right time, pulled me from my hole before it got irreversibly deep, and steered me back on track.

It was almost as if accidentally summoning a demon and having sex with him to unlock his magic worked like the charm it was meant to.

Who'd have thunk it?

Except Ash kept insisting that he wasn't using magic to help me. That he had no need to, and I wouldn't have believed him if he hadn't clicked his fingers, glamourised his demon attributes, and taken on the role of my assistant in the shop. I'd thought it was a joke at first, or part of some bigger scheme that wouldn't outlast the week—manual labour outside of the bedroom was not his thing—but he'd proven me wrong. He came to work every morning, at a more reasonable hour as he needed time to make himself presentable, but that wasn't an issue since he was actually really useful.

And good at it.

He left me to handle the flower arranging, mostly, although an afternoon masterclass had shown he was excellent at that, too. He would schmooze with customers, work the till, give me encouragement whenever I felt my mask slip, and hold down the fort whenever I was out making deliveries. It was kinda perfect, and despite my initial

reservations, I could admit, if only to myself, that having an extra pair of hands around wasn't as catastrophic as I'd once made it out to be. Accepting his help didn't feel like grounds for a mental breakdown. It didn't make me feel weak or less capable, but maybe that had to do with it being him, and how easy and... nice it was having him around more than anything else.

It also didn't hurt that, since his first day, my monthly sales had shot up tenfold.

It had to be magic, even if it was just a sprinkle. I refused to buy it was coincidence that after every time we fucked, a miracle seemed to happen. But then again, why would he bother getting his hands dirty if that were the case? Usually, he whinged if I so much as insinuated that the dishes needed to be washed, but maybe working with the flowers was a more agreeable type of work for him?

I wasn't complaining. Whatever he was doing, he was free to keep doing it, but it just struck me as odd that the only change I'd made in the shop was him, and everything was already so different. Yes, he was charming, and though he still had that air of the upper class about him—even dressed in more 'ordinary' garb—the customers found him approachable. But that didn't really explain why I'd gone from barely needing to order stock once a week, to twice, or even three times.

Like today.

I'd popped out to run a few errands and pick up some lunch, leaving Ash in charge since he was more than capable. I'd been gone for maybe two hours, tops, but came back to bare shelves and empty buckets.

My first thought was that we'd been robbed, though there were no dead bodies strewn across the floor, or piles of smoking ash, so maybe not.

"What do you mean you sold everything?" I dumped the food bags on the counter in

front of where Ash sat, feet up, book in hand, calm as anything.

Not at all concerned.

“Exactly as I said, my dear.” He flipped the page he was on, and the action brought my attention to his nimble fingers, now sans metal claw-cuffs.

It never failed to astound me how good he looked in a more human form. It probably shouldn’t have, as he’d pull off anything, and it wasn’t as if a lot had changed—his horns gone, his fangs blunt. More on par with an Oxford professor than the demon-prince vibe he typically aced. Still, I couldn’t help but find it a little jarring, even if it was only for a few hours a day until we headed back upstairs where he could unveil and be his full self again.

I’d grown accustomed to his demonness and, dare I say, it suited him better. Infinitely so. Especially those orange eyes, vibrant like the petals on a Naranja rose when they flared as his emotions ran passionate. They were temporarily dimmed to a more natural amber-tinged brown, equally beautiful, but I barely resisted lighting a fire just to see a reflection of their natural state.

A total digression to the issue at hand.

I dragged my gaze away from him to take another scan of the place. There were one or two candles, a picture frame, and literally a single stalk of fern left. The last time I’d seen it so empty was the day I’d moved in.

I turned back to him, stunned. “You said you weren’t using any magic. Not that it matters if you are, but—”

He snorted as if there was some kind of inside joke that I wasn’t involved in. “No need, petal. Just look at me.”

I stared at him blankly, confused about exactly what I was supposed to be looking at. His hair was especially pretty today, tied up in a messy bun as it was, showing off his now-rounded ears, and the deep V of his linen shirt that accentuated his sharp collarbones perfectly. But I doubted that was what he meant. “Is something supposed to be happening? Are you hypnotising the customers?”

That must’ve been the wrong reaction as Ash’s eyes narrowed and he slammed his book on the counter, not even dog-eared the page. “Either you’re being purposely obtuse or your eyes are failing you. It’s the only conclusion one could draw for how you’re not immediately landing on how gorgeous I am.”

“What...” I blinked, and I had to admit, it took me a good second to catch on. “Are you trying to say that you sold every last flower and gift in here because you’re... pretty?”

He smiled. “Naturally.”

Naturally.

“You’re so arrogant,” I said, rolling my eyes at his mock scoff of offence.

“It’s called sex appeal, pet, and I happen to have it in spades. Even in this mundane form.” He studied his nails. “It’s hardly my fault humans are simple and moronic, and will part with their money for less than a flash of well-toned ankles or a batting of thick eyelashes.”

“Flash of...” I pinched the bridge of my nose, sighing deeply. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Thank you, my dear. I don’t even have to try.” He stood with all the grace of a royal, and slid what looked like a receipt from my supplier across the counter. “I went ahead and ordered another delivery, it will—”

“You’re talking shite,” I cut in, not finished with the conversation, holding up my hands when Ash pouted. “Yes, you’re gorgeous, that’s never in dispute, but people don’t just buy things willy nilly because of it.”

Do they?

No, they didn’t.

“I can assure you, they most certainly do. Especially whenever I’m concerned.”

I shot him The Look.

“What can I say?” He leaned over the counter, closing the distance between us until I felt his breath fan my lips, making my pulse quicken. “My mouth is good for more than sucking your cock.” He winked and kissed me quickly, retreating before I could reciprocate. “I told you before, pet, I use my magic when I believe it is necessary. This was not necessary.”

I wanted to believe him, really, I did—especially when I had no reason not to. Why would he lie? It was exactly his style to flaunt his powers and his talents. He was a vain showman, and it was a sport to him to say what he felt even if it was brutal. So why would he be modest about this? I’d seen him use magic to conjure books and special tea leaves from thin air. Or move the bed so it wouldn’t bang against the wall when he rode me like he was the front runner in the Grand National, but had he really never used it directly to help me?

If that was true, why, after sleeping with him, was everything going so well?

It didn’t make any sense.

“You’re thinking on it too hard, my dear,” Ash purred, coming around to stand in my

space. One thing that hadn't changed in his human form was the extra inch or two of height he used to tower over me. I enjoyed it more than I cared to admit out loud. "Would you like to follow me into the back room and see exactly what can be exploited from you without the use of my powers, hm?"

"You're such a menace."

He chuckled darkly, ducking down to plant a kiss under my jaw. "That's not an answer."

Before I could accept his proposition, the bell above the door chimed, spoiling the moment.

Still, Ash straightened, grinning like the devil himself when he said, "Perhaps a more visual demonstration would serve you better?"

"We don't have anything left," I whisper-hissed, but the bastard held a finger up to my lips before sashaying over to the young guy who'd moseyed in.

Rolling my eyes, I moved to stand in the archway to the back room, giving myself a perfect view of how the customer stumbled as soon as his gaze fell upon my 'hot assistant.'

Ash, the smug arse, peeked over his shoulder to make sure I was watching.

"Welcome, sir," he said, in that voice like warm honey. "How can I be of service?"

"Oh, aye, er..." The man cleared his throat. "I was given yer shop's name by a pal, and thought I'd pop in for a dozen roses. For the mother, ye ken."

"It's good to hear that we're being recommended." Ash smiled, and I knew he

noticed—just like I did—the way the customer’s cheeks grew two shades pinker. Bloody tool. “Unfortunately, we’re all sold out today, but I can put you first on the list for when our delivery comes in tomorrow?”

“Aye, that’s... fine.”

“Perfect!” With temptation leaching into his every step, Ash made his way back around the counter, flipping open the diary to tomorrow’s date. “A dozen roses, was it? And what colour would you like those to be?”

“Oh, it’s her birthday, so somethin’ bright,” the guy said, eyes fixed on the way tiny pieces of Ash’s hair cascaded down the sides of his face. “Orange, maybe?”

“My favourite colour.” Ash winked before propping himself on his elbows, giving his arse a discreet little sway in my direction. “Since it’s a special occasion, can I interest you in something better?”

The guy swallowed audibly, and although relatable, I had to force myself not to scoff. Or tackle him to the floor. “What did ye have in mind?”

What didn’t he have in mind, should have been the question. Ash proceeded to upsell the guy two bouquets for his mum—one for her living room and another for her bedroom—and a wreath for his grandma’s grave. And he even managed to get rid of the very last two candles on the shelf because he’d moaned and said he adored the scent.

It seemed so easy for him to get whatever he wanted. From my perspective, every move was calculated and precise—the way he bit his lip, the way he bent over at the perfect angle to leave you wanting more. It all flowed with pure seduction, but he probably wasn’t even trying. It was natural, a perk of his demon nature, and it made a pang of jealousy well in my belly knowing that everyone who’d come into the shop

in the last month got to see the same things I did.

Those feelings were normal for friends with benefits, right?

I was so focused on appreciating the shape of Ash's arse in those tailored trousers that I didn't even notice he'd already wrapped up the customer's items and waved him out the door.

He may not have been actively using hypnosis, but it was happening, all the same.

"See? Easy as pie." He smirked, folding his arms across his chest, clearly expecting me to fall to my knees and admit he was right. Instead, I ignored him in favour of marching over to the door, locking it and flipping the sign to Closed. "We're still open for another—"

I was gripping Ash's linen shirt, dragging him down for a searing kiss before he could even finish that sentence.

And for the third time that month, I fucked him over the workbench in the back room.

I was buttoning up my jeans when a knock sounded on the shop door. Typical was my first thought, but at least they'd waited until we were finished.

With a wave of his hand, Ash went from stark naked—bite marks excluded—to fully clothed in a blink. He'd also slipped back into his human form. The horns I'd used as handles as I fucked his mouth were gone again, alongside the feathers that had sprouted over his shoulders when he'd finally let go and come all over the floor. His hair was no longer mussed or his lips blood red and kiss-bitten. It was a shame, I'd worked bloody hard to wreck him, but there was still a well-fucked look in his eyes, and that was enough to satisfy me.

For now.

“I’ll see to that,” Ash said, stepping in close to kiss me, slow and sweet—a little strange without his forked tongue and fangs. “And you, my dear, can go upstairs and get prepared for round two. And three.”

“Prepared?” I cocked an eyebrow, amused. “Am I going to need protective gear?”

“Possibly.” Ash winked and slipped off to work his charm on the customer as I shook my head and half-heartedly wiped cum off the floor and my pubes before wrestling with my shirt. I probably could have left it off, but it was a force of habit .

The bell above the door jingled, and I heard the warm and welcoming ‘good afternoon’ that followed. The abundance of casual flirtiness in his voice made me roll my eyes, though it was fond. There was just something about hearing him interact with people in my shop that had a measure of giddiness swelling inside me. I would have listened to him talk for hours—a bit of a change from when we’d first met, I’d admit—but Ash had given direct orders and I’d hate to disobey.

So, with a wistful smile, I gathered up my flat keys and headed towards the stairs.

Only to freeze mid step at the sound of a familiar voice.

“Well, hello there, and who might you be? Isaac never said he’d hired an assistant.”

I was through the arch before Ash had the chance to answer.

“Mum... Dad,” I said, looking guiltily between my parents as they stood there beside my demon roommate—the one I’d just tongue-fucked like it was an Olympic sport in the back room—who they knew absolutely nothing about.

Fuck my life.

“What are you—”

Mum squealed and advanced, her arms stretched wide for a hug that I was too slow to prepare for. “My sweet boy, I’ve missed you.” She squeezed tight, then pulled back, bracketing my face with her hands. “You hide yourself away too much. Are ye eating well?”

I couldn’t help but snort at her fussing. “Yes, Mum. ”

“Good, good.” With a light tap on my cheek, she stepped back, adjusting her purse strap on her shoulder. “We were out for a drive and thought we’d pop by, see how you’re getting on. Didn’t expect you to be closed.”

“Er, yeah.” I scratched the back of my neck. “There’s nothing left, so we saw no point in staying open. We were just working on something in the back room.”

I caught the barest hint of a smirk flick over Ash’s face, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to hide my own. Thankfully, Dad was busy eyeing the emptiness of the shop, and Mum wasn’t paying close attention, though she was trying to flag down my gaze.

I watched her pitiful attempt at eye-charades for a second before realising what she wanted. “Oh, this is Ash,” I said with a wave in his direction. “He’s just helping out while I prepare for the contest. Ash, this is my mum and dad.”

“So nice to meet you.” Mum smiled brightly, extending a hand for him to shake. “My, you are a handsome lad, aren’t you?”

“Mum...”

Ash took her bluntness in his stride, probably preening like a bird in the sun with the ego boost. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Polite, too.” She aimed that keen observation at me with a not-so-subtle wink. I knew exactly what she was getting at, and though it was great to have her approval, I refused to entertain her matchmaking .

“He has his moments,” I deadpanned, looking over at Ash until he glared back at me.

Silence fell around us, and it wasn’t until I noticed Mum shivering that I jolted back into action. “Wanna go up to the flat? It’s baltic in here and there’s nowhere to sit.”

“That would be lovely.”

With a nod, I locked the door again before leading the way to the stairs in the back.

“We only planned on stopping by for a minute, but a cup of tea would be sociable, don’t you think Gerald?” My dad didn’t get the chance to respond as she barrelled on. “You and your friend can come over tomorrow for dinner. We can catch up properly, then.”

“Oh, I don’t—”

“That’d be delightful, Mrs Miller.” Ash interrupted me, and when I peered over my shoulder to glower at him, he had her arm linked in his, guiding her up the stairs.

Bloody charmer.

Mum cooed, patting his arm. “Call me Angela.”

We got ourselves situated in the living room, my dad making a beeline for the

armchair in the corner while the rest of us squeezed like sardines onto the sofa. Ash didn't seem to mind, so I didn't make a fuss, and Mum was too busy surveying the place to care.

"You've made some changes since we last came by." She nodded approvingly. "Thank the Lord. It was such a pigsty. "

I side-eyed Ash behind her back, knowing the 'changes' she referred to were all the personal touches he'd slowly been introducing over the last few weeks. There was a bookcase, hanging plants, some display pillows we weren't supposed to sit on, and curtains that actually fit the windows, to name a few. He'd also tackled the bedrooms and the kitchen, adding little bits here and there that I'd never have thought of buying, but didn't begrudge him. If it made him more comfortable, he could use as much cupboard space as he pleased.

But none of that would be mentioned aloud as I didn't fancy my mum thinking we were in any type of relationship.

Because we weren't. It was just fucking. We were co-workers who lived together.

And Ash was a demon.

"Tea, Mum?" I said, dodging her comment and my thoughts.

"I'll make it," Ash offered, his hand on my shoulder to stop me from getting up. He took everyone's order—except mine, as he knew it off by heart—before heading to the kitchen.

He was barely out of the room when Mum decided to lean forward and whisper, not so quietly, "He seems nice."

I nodded. “He is.”

“Where is he from?”

There was a clang in the kitchen that I wasn’t sure was accidental. “Er, Chelsea. ”

“Ah, yes. I did suspect somewhere down London way, or thereabouts. He’s very... What’s the word?” Pretentious? “Posh.”

Close enough .

“I suppose he is, yeah.” She was fishing, and it was all part of her agenda of finding me a nice fella to settle down with. It felt pointless to even think about Ash in that capacity, what with him leaving once the bond was broken. But we also hadn’t spoken about the situation ourselves , so I wasn’t about to air it with my mother.

Not that he wouldn’t make a desirable partner—the last month had proven it.

“He’s been a massive help, and we’ve become friends,” I said truthfully. “That’s all.”

She seemed suspicious, but Ash chose that moment to wander back into the living room, a tray with four mugs and a plate of biscuits in his hands.

“Here we are.”

He handed them out, leaving mine for last as he perched himself on the sofa’s arm. The mug surprisingly wasn’t scalding hot, but I still blew away the steam before taking a sip. My brow furrowed. It wasn’t the bitter instant coffee I was used to. It was much richer and smoother—fucking delicious—and I knew Ash had used his magic to whip up the expensive stuff just to impress my parents. He had his chin raised when I looked up at him, a grin on his face as if he could sense my withering

stare .

Show-off.

The conversation that followed was mostly Mum nattering on about me and what I was like as a kid. My dad chimed in once or twice, but after forty-odd years of marriage, he was mostly content just to listen—he wasn't often granted a word in edgeways.

She asked Ash questions about himself, and he handled them all with grace, spinning elaborate tales of his childhood and family that I knew weren't entirely fabricated, sharing only what was necessary. It was actually fascinating to watch how easily he twisted the truth to fit the narrative. He never fumbled or panicked, just slipped from one perfect lie to the next without so much as a single eye twitch. It would have worried me if I hadn't been so certain he found enjoyment in being too honest where I was concerned. Just yesterday, he'd told me that my cooking was horrendous, then proceeded to act like I'd poisoned him.

So it was safe to say that white lies were considered a bit of a joke in our household.

For a good twenty minutes, everything seemed to be going smoothly, though, I was always in the habit of speaking too soon. Inevitably, the conversation switched to the Flower Festival, and that was where I'd predicted it would go south. Mum had told me weeks ago how excited she was for me that I'd been accepted, but she obviously wanted to revisit the topic now we were face to face.

And she had company .

“Remember when I used to take ye there as a boy?” she said wistfully, patting my leg as she directed her next words to Ash. “He loved it. The Sunflower Corner was always his favourite. They held a competition there to see who had grown the biggest

sunflower, and some of them were humongous. As tall as Christmas trees.”

“They were especially tall for a kid.” I laughed, and Ash smiled down at me.

“That was when he started taking a real interest in flowers,” she continued. “I’d come home from work and he’d be in the garden, dirt mounds all over the grass, his school uniform in a state and trainers ruined. I remember having to scrub the carpets for hours to get the muddy footprints out.”

Slight exaggeration.

There was one footprint, and it was me who’d scrubbed it clean, but I let her carry on.

“He asked for tools and seeds for every birthday and Christmas. It was all he ever wittered on about, but I’ll admit, it wasn’t until the year he managed to grow his own sunflower, seeing the excitement on his little face, that I knew he’d found his calling.”

“Didn’t he fancy himself an astronaut the summer after?” my dad teased, earning a scathing look and a tut from my mum for his efforts. He winked at me when she looked away.

I hid my snort with a cough, pleased to know I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed the embellishments for Ash’s benefit, but not willing—or daring—to call her out on it .

Mum angled herself towards me, giving me her full attention. “When you rang to say you’d got in, it felt like that day all over again. I knew it was meant to be.” She rested her hand on top of mine, and I could tell by the way her eyebrows scrunched that she was gearing up to add something sappy. “I just want you to remember how far you’ve come, love. You’ve worked bloody hard for this, and it’s okay if you don’t win. It’s the taking part that counts.”

You're not going to win.

It was disorientating how quickly every ounce of pride I'd felt in my progress drained from me. My vision grew distant, blurring slightly at the edges, and my chest suddenly felt too heavy, too tight. The last dregs of my rationality chanted that she didn't mean it badly, that she was only trying help and be supportive, but all I heard was...

Why bother trying?

I know you're not good enough, so don't be surprised if they figure it out, too.

All you ever do is fail.

She was right.

It was naive of me to think I stood a chance, that being accepted was cause for celebration. It was probably out of pity, or a mistake, because of all the florists in all the country, why the hell would they pick me? It had been a childish dream not meant to see the light of day. I should never have entered. It was a waste of time, money, and resources, and for what? To come back even more of a failure than I already was?

I should have just thrown in the towel the first time she'd told me to, should have listened to reason, but I'd wanted so badly to prove myself. To surprise everyone, and go further than I ever had before.

For all the good it did.

Hopeless.

Incompetent.

Embarrass—

Long, familiar fingers curled around my nape and squeezed, guiding me back to the surface before I sank too far. I forced myself to blink, fixing my expression into something less sullen before looking up at Ash, stunned to see an almost worried look in his eyes. He studied me. I had no idea what for, and even less idea how long I'd zoned out, but once he seemed content that I was fine, a charming grin slipped onto his face as easily as a mask, and the air around me seemed to lighten.

"Oh, he'll do more than take part," he said, his voice full of pride and conviction. "He will make it right to the very end. I have every confidence."

Mum perked up beside me, and the fact that she hadn't removed her hand from mine or let her smile waver an inch told me just how quick Ash had acted. Or... had he frozen time?

"Good!" Mum said, enthusiastic. "Keep thinking like that. I believe in you, Iz."

What?

"What? "

"I... believe in you," she said again, her brow creasing.

"You do?"

It was the first time in years that she'd said those words out loud. Since my first hurdle, I'd been hearing that I should give up, that quitting and moving on was my best option. I'd never been given the alternatives—the encouragement, the

optimism—and after so long, it had settled on me like dead weight. Brick by brick, each negative word had nestled its way inside my head and made a home there.

It wasn't her fault. Instead of being an adult and talking , I'd shut myself away, hoping it would quiet the cynical echo, but not only had it made her more desperate to 'help,' it had shown me that being alone was somehow ten times louder.

Yet another vicious cycle of my own making.

It was as if the same realisation dawned on her at that moment. Her demeanour softened, and her eyes filled with regret.

“Oh, love. Of course I do.” She dragged me into her arms, rubbing soothing circles over my back. I melted into it. “I'm so proud of you, Iz. Always. I just... I thought the reason you distanced yourself was because you felt under pressure to do well, and didn't want us to see otherwise. I only meant to take that weight off your shoulders, to make it clear that we love you no matter what. I never intended for you to think we didn't believe in you. Not at all. I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay,” I said, and it was .

There was a difference between knowing something and hearing it said aloud, and sometimes only the latter could validate the truth. Hearing that my family wasn't against me, that they were on my side and rooting for me was like a painkiller—instant relief.

It wasn't a permanent fix. Of course it wasn't. Only the changes I made myself could reverse the damage that had been done, but that simple 'I believe in you' was a start. It reshelled the swarm of self-doubt, let me think clearly again and see more than just a future laden with disaster and defeat.

Everything will be okay.

Mum drew back, her hand coming up to cradle my cheek. “You silly goose.” She laughed kindly. “All I want is for you to be happy, baby, but I know you have to find it your own way, at your own pace. Your father and I are here whenever you need us, though I’m certain that you and Ash have it all handled.”

It was as if a magnet pulled my gaze up to Ash once more. His focus was already on me, his eyes pinning me to the spot like it was an instinct to always have me in his sights. The way he could strip my soul bare with those eyes and lay my thoughts out on a silver platter for his consumption used to set my teeth on edge, but now, it was the opposite. He was no longer a source of caution and mystery for me, he was resolution and excitement, an influence that surpassed all others and gave my life back the spark it had been missing for far too long.

Did that make him the devil on my shoulder? Possibly.

Did I give one iota of a fuck? Don’t tell my mother, but ...

Absolutely not.

Every part of me and my life that he had access to, he’d been given willingly, and that realisation probably should have scared me a lot more than it did.

A throat cleared off to the side, and with a start, I followed the sound. Mum was smiling at us knowingly. “We’ll let you two get on,” she said in that perceptive way of hers.

No wonder she and the bloody demon got on.

She rose with an oof , giving her dress a quick smooth down before rounding on me

and pointing. “Dinner tomorrow night. No excuses.” Her finger moved to Ash. “Both of you.”

I rolled my eyes half-heartedly, chanting a monotone, “Yes, Mum” as Ash gave a polite agreement. She nodded, pacified, then trotted off to gather her purse and coat, happy as Larry to have gotten her way. Dad came over as I stood, reaching out to give my shoulder a parting squeeze.

He said nothing, but that gesture was his ‘ goodbye ,’ ‘ take care ,’ and ‘ keep it up ’ all in one.

I didn’t need anything more.

They both headed for the door with Ash and I in tow, my mum nattering about the bare walls needing some photo frames or mirrors as my dad, with all the patience of a saint, tried ushering her out. He was almost successful the fourth time, only for her to change her mind and turn back around.

“Take good care of him, won’t you?” she said.

It was directed over my head to Ash, who did a showy little bow and promised, “It would be an honour, ma’am. ”

“I like him.” She giggled, nudging me with her elbow before descending the stairs.

I side-eyed the smirking demon I’d accidentally summoned all those weeks ago. The one who, in his own way, had made me feel more deserving of happiness than anyone ever had. Who’d gone from being the last person in the world I’d ever imagined myself sharing space with, to the only person to give me everything I hadn’t even known I needed.

My heart did an involuntary little skip.

Yeah, I liked him, too.

Chapter nine

ISAAC

One week before the contest, a couple of show officials stopped by to do an interview and get clips of the shop. I wasn't guaranteed a slot in the TV coverage—there was only so much free space they had for participants, and with so many florists in the running, they usually reserved the main portion for the finalists—but they still wanted to be prepared.

I'd only started watching the show virtually last year, after losing all motivation to go to the contest in person. Or anywhere, really. Were it not for Ash and his appetite for ambition, I probably would've been doing that this year, too—sitting on my sofa, alone, wishing I could partake, but telling myself I never would. It wasn't the same as being there, amidst the action, seeing it all in real time, especially since it usually aired months after the event, but I'd pretended it was a fraction better than missing out entirely.

It was crazy to think I'd be seeing it from a different perspective altogether. Doing exactly what I'd said I'd never do. Not just crazy. Scary, actually, but it was too late to get cold feet about it now.

The programme was split into two parts. On Saturday, the presenters would scout the showgrounds, get involved in the activities, interview gardening experts, and give out the results of the smaller competitions. On Sunday, it was all about the three-round main event and highlighting the florists skilled enough to make it through to the finals. That was where the clips of the participants would be played—a bit of insight

into the contestants and what made them tick to give the viewers someone to root for. I'd never been on television, and I was nervous as fuck about the prospect, but also... excited?

I hadn't even grumbled when Ash had offered to dress me up in fancy clothes that morning.

"So, Isaac," the interviewer, a short man with specs and a friendly smile, said. The cameraman was behind him, lens trained on me, and I did my best to ignore it lest I sweat right through Ash's efforts. "Now that we know more about you and where you're from, can you tell us anything about the plans for your showpiece?"

The showpiece.

That was the one thing that wasn't coming to me as easily as I'd thought it would. I'd done a few trial runs earlier in the week, tried an assortment of different arrangements, used different flowers, even let Ash pick out some randoms to see if anything clicked, but nothing felt quite right. They were all beautiful, some more extravagant than others, but they lacked that WOW factor that all the previous winners had.

The vision in my head was vague, but I knew it had to be memorable, otherwise what was the point? I only had one shot.

"I have a few ideas," I half lied, twisting my fingers in my lap. "Nothing's set in stone yet. We'll see what happens."

Without thinking, I glanced over at Ash, who was circling the flower buckets, pointing to the more exotic blooms as he was trailed by the other official and cameraman. He had insisted on wearing something a little more in tune with his elegant, otherworldly nature—first impressions, and all that—and I couldn't fault him

for the decision. If I didn't end up on TV, he definitely would—as a special guest, probably.

He looked beautiful, as he often did, even without trying. But the slips of yellow-and-green silk paired with the baggy pants he'd chosen reminded me of the demon who'd appeared through a puff of smoke in my bedroom only two months ago.

Except... different.

Somehow.

“A surprise, how exciting!” The interviewer—Mike, I thought his name was—beamed before checking the script in his lap, tapping it with finality. “Well, I think you've answered all our questions. We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us, and we wish Miller's Meadow the best of luck. Is there anything you or your partner would like to add? ”

The camera panned to Ash, who was already sashaying over to me. He stood at my side, resting a hand delicately on my shoulder. It was a friendly gesture for the cameras, but a signal of support for me.

“No, I... just... thank you for the opportunity,” I said.

Mike gave an approving nod before his eyes drifted up to Ash and he smiled expectantly.

The demon chuckled, low and sultry. “Oh, nothing from me, Michael. I'm only here to flirt and look pretty.”

I rolled my eyes, and the interviewer laughed under his breath but clearly thought the role was being performed perfectly. “Alright then.” He slapped his knees and stood,

extending a hand for me, then Ash, to shake. “I guess we’ll see you both at the show. Have a wonderful rest of your day.”

“You too.”

They gathered their equipment quickly, but by the time they were ready to leave, Ash had managed to convince the official he’d shown around to order a bouquet for her wife. I wasn’t exactly well versed on the rules, but she’d paid for it, so technically it couldn’t be classed as bribery, right?

Ash didn’t seem to think so, but promised to wipe her memory if it came up as such.

I didn’t doubt him.

Once we were alone, I switched the sign to Closed and sighed as if my lungs had been detaining all my breath. There was an odd sense of giddiness in my belly, a warm, eager feeling that made me want to either dance around like no one was watching or tear Ash’s clothes off. Or both. Simultaneously.

The interview had gone off without a hitch. I hadn’t let my mouth run away with me or said anything embarrassing. I hadn’t panicked or buckled under the pressure when they’d asked me to show off my skills. It was almost too good to be true, and I half expected to wake up at any minute with everything in ruins.

I may have pinched myself, just to be sure.

“You did splendidly, petal,” Ash assured me, reading my mind as he often seemed to do. He tilted my chin up with his finger. “How are you feeling?”

Good.

Exhilarated.

Horny?

Instead of using words, I stretched up to kiss him, my tongue seeking entry with a flick across the seam of his lips. He didn't deny me, his chest rumbling with an approving hum as he opened up, accepting my enthusiasm and responding with his own. That fluttering in my stomach intensified, a surge of wild, glowing energy that rapidly flooded south. My hands fell to his arse, squeezing the soft globes as I ground my hips forward, showing him exactly how I felt.

He smirked approvingly against my lips. "In a good mood, then?"

"Very good." I mouthed at his jaw and neck, my dick perking up at the soft moan that escaped him. "I want you."

"I'm pleased to hear it." It was permission if I'd ever heard it, especially when he tipped his head back to let my teeth sink into the juncture above his collarbone. But instead of letting me take it further, he tugged gently on my hair, drawing me back. He snorted at my pout. "I am very much on board with being ravished, my dear, but first I want to deliver on a promise. A treat, if you will."

I perked up like a dog being offered a bone, and how sad was it that I fully recognised the comparison? "Which one?"

"You'll have to follow me upstairs to find out."

"If this is about what you said last night... about teaching me how to deepthroat? We can do that right here."

"It's not, but I haven't forgotten that either. So..." With a feather-light touch, he

palmed the bulge in my jeans. All thoughts left my head on a moan, and I couldn't stop myself from swaying into the friction. "If you're a very good pet, and you do as I say..." He clamped down, startling the most undignified whine from my throat. "And be patient, I might give you both."

I nodded dumbly—willing to do his bidding, whatever that entailed—before allowing myself be led upstairs.

It wasn't until we'd reached the living room and he'd magicked the furniture closer to the walls that he turned to me, smirking impishly. "Ready?"

I snorted, examining the big circle of space with some apprehension. Was he going to summon something? Or was he going to sacrifice me to another demon lord? Where Ash was concerned, it could have been either. To keep me on my toes.

"I haven't a clue what's about to happen, but sure." I shrugged. "I'll trust you."

"Foolish," he chided, though it was fond, so I doubted murder was on the agenda. Except, he did start peeling off his shawl and crop top, and he only ever took off his fancy clothes when he didn't want them to get dirty or he was getting ready for sex.

I hoped it was the latter.

That thought was torn from my head when a towering pair of bird wings erupted from his back in a graceful swoop. A gasp left me, and they unfolded and fluttered as if craving the air between each orange feather before settling behind him in an impressive arch. Tendrils of what looked like fire—but could have been magic in its three-dimensional form—twined up the length of his horns like an endless snake, and all I could do was blink, taking him in.

I wasn't a stranger to the horns, had gotten quite used to them, but the flames were

new, and though I'd seen his feathers and glowing eyes before, all of it together made him look absolutely divine. The irony wasn't lost on me. His wings, especially, granted his appearance a more magical edge, and my fingers itched to reach out and see if they were as silky as they appeared .

"Can I... touch you?" I heard myself say, expecting him to refuse as he had before. Instead, he let one wing fan out, extending it fluidly towards me.

"Go ahead," he said, standing stock still, though his feathers ruffled in front of my face as if enticing me to touch.

I remembered him saying they were sensitive, so once my fingers finally trailed along one of the wispy blades, they were tentative, gentle. I refused to hurt him for the sake of my curiosity, or be the cause of any discomfort, but I also didn't want to squander my chance.

He may never let me near him like this again, so I was making the most of it.

Each long, narrow feather was the colour of the sky when the sun disappeared below the horizon. That bright orange glow that made everything just a little more beautiful. They quivered with my exploration, showing their range, and it was a wonder how something could be both fragile as satin yet strong enough to carry a full-grown being in flight. But by some celestial blessing, there they were, ethereal and bold.

Just like Ash.

"Would you like to see my phoenix form?" he asked, his eyes having stayed on me the entire time, and seriously, was that even a question?

Hell yes, I wanted to see it!

“Yes, please.”

“So polite,” he teased before moving back, perching himself on the arm of the sofa and taking a long, steadying breath .

With a click of his fingers, the flames from his horns swelled and spread over his body, veiling him from view. I panicked, swaying on my feet as if preparing to leap in and save him. Not my brightest idea, no, but when was the last time self-preservation held me back?

Thankfully, a rescue mission wasn’t needed. The inferno vanished as quickly as it had come, leaving no trace of charring or ruin, only a large, rust-coloured bird with such a pristine and regal air about it that I couldn’t have mistaken it for anyone other than Ash.

A startled laugh burst out of me, more disbelief than amusement. Two months ago, I’d been adamant that magic and the supernatural didn’t exist. And even if there had been a chance to deny the circumstances of Ash’s appearance, there was no way to ignore the very real mythical creature perching three feet in front of me, tilting its head as if reading my thoughts. The bloody thing was almost taller than me. Granted, it— he —sat on the edge of my sofa, but still. No bird should have been that size. Not on Earth, anyway.

He was easily twice the height of a peacock, and had a similar body shape. His head and tail were the main differences. They were covered in lush plumage, the feathers the same hue as in his other form, but they flared out—on full display as if he was trying his best to impress me.

It worked.

“You’re beautiful, Ash,” I murmured, scritchng the soft feathers near his head when

he nudged my hand. He trilled happily, puffing up some more, and I couldn't help laughing at the fact that, even in bird form, he managed to be a smug asshole. "Such a vain birdy."

After several long moments, Ash shifted seamlessly back to his more human appearance, keeping the horns and wings. He also wore that 'something different' I'd spotted earlier. I could have been imagining it, what with my emotions up in the air, but it was as if there was a change in the way he looked at me. Under his smirk, it wasn't just lust anymore. It was tender. Reverent. He'd shown me his true phoenix form because he trusted me, and why did that make my heart stutter?

"Do you approve?" he asked, clearly pleased with himself—as he had every right to be—but there was something else there.

Something unsure .

"Yes," I said without hesitation, and content with the answer—if the expansion of his chest was anything to go by—Ash flexed his shoulders, his wings beginning to recede.

I stopped him with a hand on his bicep. "Stay like that... Please." He cocked an eyebrow, but stalled the shift, tilting his head curiously. I swallowed down the stray nerves. "I want you. Just as you are."

It was slight, but Ash seemed taken-aback by the request. His arrogance and sense of self-importance faltered, and if I had to take a guess, I'd wager that was a sensation he had no experience with. The skin between his brows creased, and his eyes, though alight with fire, softened with the realisation that he didn't have to wear a mask around me. He could be vulnerable, raw, and without all the fanfare, and I'd still accept him. That was an alien concept to him, I supposed, which made me a little sad, though the feeling was fleeting.

Ash nodded, apparently curious about the unknown, much like me. “Do as you will,” he said, and though he tried to conceal it, I heard the plea in his voice.

I would never refuse him.

His gaze followed my hands as I undressed him, barely even blinking when I guided him onto the sofa and settled between his spread thighs. I took my time stretching him open, watching the subtle flutter of his wings, how the membranes tensed and rippled to announce each jolt of pleasure. His eyes were closed, the soft planes of his neck exposed as he arched into the cushion. Sweat trickled over his skin, glistening like dewdrops, and I was helpless against the urge to dip my tongue in to taste. My lips followed the trail to his collarbones, kissing each protruding feather as my fingers rocked in and out of his body.

Slow .

Careful .

I left bite marks on his skin, claiming him as I hadn’t before. For the first time, there was no urgency, no rush. Although I typically yearned for his commands, eager to obey every one, this subtle switch in dynamic felt right, too. I wanted to thoroughly worship him, to show him how grateful I was for the chance to see his true form .

Surprisingly, he didn’t fuss. He didn’t demand for me to go faster, or roll on top and pin me down so he could set the pace. He let me take control, seemingly patient for once just to lie there and be adored.

Admittedly, I was the one concealing restlessness. Under the surface, there was fear stewing in my gut, caused by the feelings I had whenever I looked at him now. ‘Now’ meaning ‘all the time,’ not just the burst of satisfaction at witnessing his shudder and gasp as I finally replaced my fingers with my cock—though that undeniably made my

chest ache, too.

I felt strongest about the ordinary things. The way he subconsciously rubbed his feet together whenever he lay on my sofa, reading. The little, honest smile he did whenever he smelled each flower before arranging them in their buckets. All of it brought on that bloom of overwhelming and unfamiliar chaos in my chest, and it scared me. My fondness for him had been gradual—and somewhat reluctant, in the very beginning—but looking back, it was always going to happen.

It had only taken two weeks for me to figure out that having Ash in my life made everything better, made me better, and how could I ever have expected feelings not to grow from there?

I was such an idiot.

Lowering myself until there wasn't a hairsbreadth of space between our bellies, I braced an arm beside his head and hooked the other under his knee. I pried his leg wider, desperate to reach deeper inside, to fill him completely, but not for release. I needed it to last, to be seated inside his soft, tight heat as long as my body could bear it.

From the way one of Ash's wings folded heavily over my back and his heels dug into my arse, both hindering any retreat, I knew he felt the same.

For what could have been minutes or hours, it was a hard yet steady push and pull that had the breath seizing in my lungs. A sense of peace settled over me, blurring out everything except the clench of Ash's hole around my cock, the pulsing beats of his heart, and his breath fanning over my lips. The coiling pleasure of orgasm was a constant, low thrum down my spine, never rising, just teetering on that edge until I was ready to fall.

Flaming eyes never strayed from mine, and it was so unbearably and uncharacteristically intimate that part of me wanted to turn away, to hide the embarrassing flush that spread over my skin like wildfire, but I couldn't. Something in his gaze enthralled me, demanded that I keep staring into those fiery-orange depths with every stuttering sway of my hips.

Ash's sounds grew urgent, his nails biting more insistently into my shoulders, my arms, my back, encouraging me to give him everything. And I did. He came untouched, with my name rolling off his split tongue in a breathless incantation that had every broken piece of me slotting back into place, and I followed closely behind.

There was near silence as I buried my nose in the crook of his neck, inhaling his sweet, smoky scent. Fingers carded through my hair, a simple caress at first, but soon coaxing me to look up. I surrendered, as I often did, seeing his fond smile as his palm moved to cup my cheek.

I leaned into the gesture, basked in it, craving the grounding presence of Ash's touch. In that moment, as the feelings in my chest buzzed radiantly with life, it occurred to me that I was genuinely happy. It had been so long that I barely recognised the sensation. But it was there, cocooning me, making me feel weightless and fulfilled.

But it was bittersweet.

Ash would inevitably leave me and go back to his fancy palace whenever we were no longer tied. He wasn't meant to be mine, no matter how much I'd surely begun wishing for it. Still, there was a choice. I could ruin the progress we'd made, do what I did best and retreat. Or I could cherish it, make the most of our time left, and thrive in his company as long as I could.

The answer felt obvious to me, and it wasn't the option I'd have probably picked two months ago. I didn't know how I'd cope with letting him go, but for now, it didn't

really matter.

I had everything I'd ever wanted, and even if it was to be short-lived, that was better than never having had it at all.

We'd moved to the bed for the second part of Ash's earlier promise. As it turned out, I sucked at taking his cock into my throat—pun only slightly intended—but it didn't matter. The demon was resourceful and had a mountain of kinks he wanted to introduce me to, so I'd found myself tied to the headboard and edged with my Fleshlight until I sobbed instead.

Despite the intensity of it, the sweetness from the living room had lingered. Ash had whispered praise into my ear as he'd stroked me languidly, instructing me on how to roll my hips into the soft, wet sleeve, drawing it out and milking each sensation for all it was worth. He'd plastered himself to my side, a part of us always touching, and he'd kissed me like he would die if he didn't. It had made me feel precious, vulnerable, and overwhelmed, all at once. I didn't want to dwell on it too deeply, didn't want to hope for something impossible, but as we savoured the afterglow, Ash wrapped himself around me—I swore his legs were endless—and the closeness made it hard not to.

"I had a thought." Ash broke the comfortable silence.

"Dangerous."

He ignored my sass. "You haven't yet chosen your showpiece. Why not do your special from the website?"

"Because it's simple?" I said as if it were obvious. "And I'd be laughed out the door."

He lifted his head, setting his chin on his hand as he looked at me. "Everyone will be

going to the extreme, so why not do something they won't expect? Take something you're exceptional at, revive it, do it well, and stand out. Simple doesn't have to mean boring."

I studied his face, waiting for the punchline, but apparently he wasn't joking. "Yeah, I'll have to think about that one."

With a huff, he rested his head on my chest again. "Be sure and do, because I have yet to steer you wrong, and it's high time you recognised that."

Feeling cheeky, I replied with a flat, "Yes, Ash." I fully expected retaliation in the form of a petulant scoff or, even better, one of his tantrums.

Instead, there was a pause, one long enough that I'd forgotten what I was waiting on when he said, "Amadeus."

I frowned. "Hm?"

"My name," he said, tipping his head back to peer up at me again. "It's Amadeus." He shrugged. "I thought it prudent to make you aware."

I'd known Ash was a nickname, but never thought to pry for the real one. I was curious, of course, but it had seemed important for him to keep it secret, so I hadn't crossed that boundary.

Now, though...

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"A name is a powerful thing, and I didn't feel like giving you access to any more of me than was forced. I couldn't trust you not to wield it to your advantage or gloat that

a demon's vulnerabilities sat in the palm of your hand. ”

“But now you do?”

He nodded. “I had an inkling you weren't dishonest the day you told me you wouldn't ever try to control me, but now, after spending each day with you, I know for certain. You are... a bewildering creature. Truly.”

“Thanks? I think.”

He laughed, and there was a moment when we just stared at each other. It felt charged, like he'd told me something he'd never intended to, but had decided I was worthy. That I deserved to know every part of him. It made me feel special, as if I mattered on a deeper level than just sex, but I could also have been projecting. I'd realised my crush, and now my brain had decided to analyse every word he said, fixate on his actions over the last eight weeks, and imagine they had some hidden meaning.

I'd ignore it.

I had to.

Ash shifted as if uncomfortable. “Now, do not expect any more confessions or compliments. I am quite spent for the evening.”

To offset my wayward emotions, I smirked. Teasing was easy. Teasing was familiar. Teasing was the way to go. “Whatever you say, Amadeus .”

His shoulders stiffened, and his cock twitched against my thigh. “Hm, I like that,” he purred, his eyes flooding brighter orange. “Once I am recovered, you must let me hear how it sounds when you're begging me to let you come. ”

“Of course you must.” I rolled my eyes and laughed, distracting myself from the thought that if my heart beat any louder it might actually combust. “Should I stop calling you Ash, then? Since you brought it up, I assume—”

“There is no need to upend routine,” he cut in. “I had thought it would be my preference to hear you address me by my given name, but I’ve grown rather accustomed to ‘Ash.’ Perhaps we’ll keep Amadeus for rare and special occasions.”

I pretended to contemplate it. “Like when I’m mad at you?”

Ash gasped, affronted. “I am the epitome of perfection, my dear. I see no reason for your ire to ever be directed toward me.”

I smiled widely in amusement, leaning in to brush my nose against his. “It’s a good thing you’re so humble.”

With a soft kiss, he pulled back, but only far enough to scan my face—and he did so with alarming accuracy. “You know, I used to believe that nothing could bring me more joy than torturing pitiful souls,” he mused, trailing a finger over my cheek. “But I do rather favour seeing you smile.”

As far as cutesy pillow talk went, that was pretty low on the scale, but it made my treacherous heart skip, all the same. “It’s because of you.” I cleared my throat. “What you’ve done for me, I mean.”

“Not entirely, my dear. I do, of course, take some credit, but your success in the last few months is to do with the confidence you’ve grown.”

“And your magic,” I added, but he shook his head in denial .

“As I’ve said before, it has nothing to do with magic. All you needed was a nudge in

the right direction, someone to guide you and help you realise your worth, which I was happy to provide.” He tapped my nose. “The rest was. All. You .”

‘ Guide you. ’

Ash’s words had a lightbulb sparking in my head, a memory hitting me like an epiphany—“ He will guide you through your struggles, resurrect that which you have lost, and help you on the path to success. ”

The final puzzle pieces slotted into place.

I’d already figured out that Ash had landed on my doorstep at exactly the right time with the purpose of assisting me, but the shopkeeper had said there was a lesson to be learned. My struggle wasn’t the shop, not directly. It was my lack of hope and confidence—what I had lost—which in turn had shrouded my route to success.

All of Ash’s attention and care had lifted me up and made me forget all the people who’d ever told me I wasn’t good enough—namely myself. I’d seen concrete proof of the difference those small changes had made, but there was one crucial part missing...

I still had to believe it all myself, right?

I could’ve laughed at how simple it was. Of course the key was going to be one of those corny fairy-tale finales, where love conquered all and broke the curse, but in this case, it was self -love. I had to trust that I could do this on my own. Not because Ash said so, but because I believed it possible .

And honestly? I think I did.

Or, at least, I could now truly see myself getting there.

I'd made it this far through sheer stubbornness and force of will. I'd dug my heels in against whatever was thrown at me and that had to mean part of me—not just the spiteful part—always believed I had as much chance as anyone. That giving up wasn't for me because I knew it would get better because I was capable of making it happen.

I'd just needed someone—a mythical being from another realm—to remind me.

I threaded my fingers through Ash's hair and dragged him in for a kiss, moaning as his tongue grazed mine. It was filthy and deep, and when we eventually parted, his eyelashes fluttered dazedly.

“What was that for?”

I shrugged. “Just realised something important.”

“Pray tell.”

“I'm not a failure,” I said with conviction, my chest swelling with pride. It felt good to say out loud, like the restraints I'd worn for years finally snapped, freeing me. “I am good enough, and I... actually believe I can do this.”

Ash stared as if seeing me for the first time, assessing, before a slow grin curved his lips. Without warning, he rolled on top of me, wildfire in his eyes. “About damned time. I was beginning to wonder if I'd been tied to a hopeless cause.”

I laughed softly, curling my hands over his hips as he straddled me. “Sorry to disappoint,” I said, and there was that smile lighting up his face again. Not a smirk, but something more genuine that had me convinced I'd never be able to ignore my feelings.

And I didn't want to.

"I've told you before..." he said, bending down until our mouths were barely a few inches apart. "You could never disappoint me, my darling."

Chapter ten

AMADEUS

The tether was broken.

I was free to leave now that my little petal had, at long last, recognised his merit.

The fact that it hadn't taken a lifetime should have thrilled me. I could return to my realm, could go back to decadence and immorality. But while there was a pang of mourning in my chest for the loss of the familiarities of my manor, as I stared down at the pretty creature's sleeping form, recalling his beaming smile as the spell had shattered, it occurred to me that I hadn't the desire to. I'd persisted this far, and it seemed a waste to leave before the contest.

Or before he'd even grown sick of me.

Despite its many flaws, I'd become used to the human realm, and it would have been terribly moronic of me to spoil our routine now, especially when there was so much left to discover about the charming florist who'd managed to worm his way into my good graces. It had been unintentional, the affection I'd developed for Isaac over the last two months—a gradual affair, but no less true. I felt a kinship with him that was more than a need to use him for entertainment. In fact, the very thought of using him for anything he wasn't willingly begging for had me ready to tear out my own throat.

A wild response to admit in itself, but it was my reflex reaction, nonetheless.

To be clear, I wasn't the type for domestication. I still craved depravity and chaos, not corniness and mush, but my human saw that and didn't shun me for it. He was tolerant of my whims and fancies, was fascinated with knowing more, and feeding off that curiosity was an addiction all on its own. I enjoyed his company, even found myself seeking out his presence more and more, not only for sex, but conversation.

Just... him .

At first, I'd suspected it was all the hidden workings of the spell, the bond in my chest making me unnaturally dependent, but I wasn't so sure anymore. Yes, the effects of the summoning had prevented me from leaving as I typically would after having my fun, but had the situation been intolerable, without hesitation, I would've seen to it that the human fell into permanent sleep sooner than nature intended. I had no qualms about murder, particularly when it involved my freedom—or lack thereof—but I'd made the conscious decision to keep him alive. What was that if not my own inclination ?

Fascination, eagerness, and pride had all led to the sudden rush of caring. His brashness at our meeting had halted any rash actions, my desire to ruin him had held my attention, and watching him bloom under my guidance had opened my eyes. Before I'd fully grasped it, I couldn't backtrack as I was already fond of him. Genuine fondness. Not the type I felt for killing or torture, but the type that had me yearning for reciprocation.

I should have paused to assess the development sooner, but it had progressed so steadily that I'd realised it too late.

That magician had bound us together knowing we were the solution to the other's needs. His intentions—I reluctantly admitted—appeared not to have been as nefarious as I'd suspected. He had brought me here not only for the purpose of fulfilling the human's wishes, but also my own. The emptiness I'd felt was not caused

by the inane repetition of my life, but rather the lack of someone to share it with.

It had been unthinkable. The possibility that the void in my soul was longing for a companion had never once crossed my mind, yet all it took was an oversight on the human's part, a little tolerance on mine, and everything had clicked.

I'd never known love or tenderness, and it seemed absurd to mourn that which I had no experience of, but it couldn't be denied that in such a short span of time, I already felt fuller, more whole, than I ever had before. The fact that no one had even attempted to figure out my whereabouts was telling. Not that any of them would have needed to enter the human realm for it, but a siege and rescue would have been nice.

My father doubtless already knew my fate and had decided it wasn't worth the effort to bring me back. He had spares, after all. I'd made my peace with that and expected no more. It worked in my favour, meant I was able to carve out my own place in the universe, and was freer to make my own choices.

Whatever those might be.

Isaac mumbled in his sleep, instinctively shuffling closer and smiling once he felt my warmth. I combed my fingers through his blond curls, an ache welling in my chest at his sweet little sigh.

I laughed faintly.

Him. He was my choice. The fates had been perfectly clear the moment they'd placed him in my path. I'd only needed a little longer to grasp it.

For an age, I'd meant nothing to anyone. The twelfth name scratched at the bottom of a scroll, an insignificant bud on an overgrown family tree. But thanks to this inspiring creature, I'd had a taste of what it felt like to be wanted, to be needed by someone for

more than frivolous deeds, and well, I knew my nature. I was greedy, possessive of treasures once they were mine , and letting such a precious rarity slip through my fingers would be unbelievably careless.

I'd stay by my human's side for as long as he would have me. It would take time and patience on his part, but I'd learn what it was to adore and be adored—truly, and not out of obligation.

He was the fulfilment I'd been missing. Of course he was .

Whoever this 'Magician' may be, I felt compelled to credit him.

The eve before the Flower Festival, Isaac, my sweet, tender-hearted Isaac, had the idea of showing me his comfort activity—watching a film with various treats and what he'd called a 'blanket fort.' Also cuddling, if I were amenable.

He'd said it would be a distraction from Sunday, but even without my powers of perception, I saw right through the excuse.

I believed it was the human ritual known as a 'date'—a mating display to express interest in another—though he hadn't used the term explicitly. For whatever reason, he was trying to subdue his affections for me, which was terribly endearing, and foolish considering he wore his emotions on his sleeve and was, therefore, incredibly transparent.

Over the last few days, he'd been not-so-subtly acting more and more peculiar: complimenting me for the littlest achievements, gazing at me when he had no reason to—other than my obvious splendour, of course—and being even clumsier than usual. Just yesterday, he'd stuttered through his 'good morning' and, clearly embarrassed, had tried to escape to the bathroom, only to fall out of bed in a tangle of sheets .

There was an indent in my lip from where I'd bitten it too hard to stifle my laughter.

As the objective party, I could have put him out of his misery, told him he had no need to worry as I was flattered by, and even returned, his affections. But I was still a demon, and watching him blunder and sneak was rather entertaining .

And adorable.

“Okay, so... fair warning,” Isaac began as he reclined at the far end of the sofa, nestling himself under the blankets. He hadn't faltered, but his need to seek approval was telling. “This is mindless guff, but it's something I don't have to focus on. Is that alright?” He gazed over at me to gauge my reaction, and once I nodded in acknowledgement, he added, “Don't you, ahem , want to get into something comfortable? Your dressing gown, maybe?”

As transparent as glass. “Oh, I had thought you'd wish to absorb the film, but if I was mistaken, I can change.”

“No, no, I just want you to be comfy.” He gestured at the TV with a nervous laugh. “It's a long one.”

“The longer the better for me, petal.” I winked salaciously, satisfied with the answering blush and lap-pillow adjustment I got for my efforts.

“Oh-kay, then.” He fixed his eyes on the screen, but after a moment of shifting restlessly in his seat and flapping at the covers, he peered down at the distance between us with a small frown, his lips thinning before he looked away again. He was clearly discontent, but didn't want to voice it, so, ever merciful, I shuffled closer, nudging his arm out of the way in order to plaster myself against his side.

Immediately, he stilled, his scent filling with pleasure.

He finally pressed Play.

We managed ten minutes of a grief-stricken human at his typewriter, lamenting his lost love before the inquisition started.

“Do you have movies in your realm?”

“We have the medium, yes,” I said, not lifting my head from his chest. “But it is not something I have ever participated in. I like books.”

“Hold on.” He tipped my head back. “So I’m finally giving you a first ? No way.”

Considering I had never felt this level of protectiveness or contentment, it was safe to say he’d given me many of those. “Yes, my dear, you are.”

The sweetling grinned as if I’d handed him the world, and that alone made discovering that the film included singing slightly more bearable.

Slightly.

There was a plot, there had to be, though it must’ve retreated at the sight of all the gaudy outfits and amateur dramatics. Despite that, one part managed to pique my interest—or rather, Isaac’s reaction to it. The male lover made a grand romantic gesture that I hadn’t really been paying attention to. It was another song that dragged on far longer than necessary. But peering up at my date, I caught his wistful smile and teary eyes, and for whatever reason, it made me eager to compete.

I was not one for losing, and a film would not outdo me in matters of flair. I had to invent a ‘grand gesture’ of my own. Something to prove my devotion and loyalty, but without the tacky ensemble.

Hmm, perhaps...

Lacing our fingers together, I nuzzled a soft kiss against his knuckles and used my magic to pause the movie before glancing up at him. “If the judges at this contest of yours don’t recognise you as their clear winner, I’ll poison them for you.” Another kiss, my gaze fierce and unwavering. “I will watch as the life drains from their eyes, as blood spills from their orifices, then lay their empty husks at your feet. I swear it to you.”

The creature was speechless, blinking down at our entwined hands, and I felt victory blooming in my chest.

Success .

“What on earth are you...?” Or not. He shifted for a better angle to gape at me with his wide, startled eyes—not the expression I was going for. “No, you... Ash, no! You definitely are not doing that. No way.”

I frowned.

Had he not heard me?

I was offering to lay his enemies at his feet, should the situation call for it. What was more romantic than that?

“Why not?” I said. “If you are wronged, I’d wish to make them pay for it. ”

“That’s—” He chewed on the rest of his sentence, snort-huffing as he cast his eyes back to the TV, only for them to return seconds later, sparkling with awareness. “Are you... are you trying to be sweet? Because chocolates would do the job.”

I scoffed. As if confectionery was anything compared to what I offered. “How droll.”

“Not to me! I love chocolates. Or, I don’t know, cake? And if it means everyone gets to live, all the better!”

“Torture, then?”

“No.”

I rolled my eyes, tilting my head away so I could sulk without an audience. “You humans are so hard to please.”

“I’m literally the opposite.” He gripped my chin, forcing me to meet his teasing smirk—a recently developed look that never failed to rile me. “Besides, what other humans are you trying to please, hm?”

I shrugged, playing coy. “Well, since you do not appreciate my efforts, I suppose I should seek—”

He kissed me, and it was possessive, no fumbling or awkwardness. His fingers migrated to my neck, curling gently yet firmly enough to hold me in place as he staked his claim. It lit a fire under my skin and wrenched a moan from deep in my throat. So jealousy was the key to weakening his restraint?

Duly noted.

Isaac seemed to remember himself as we parted, a flush spreading over his freckled cheeks as his eyes darted to every corner of my face, clearly checking for my reaction and well-being. He removed his hand, flexing his fingers as if not knowing where to place them, or what to do in general.

My cock was so hard it had its own heartbeat.

“So, no killing... okay?” he reiterated, and I was too overcome with the fog of lust to do anything but nod.

Was it any wonder I’d found myself so enamoured with him? Even after spending every day for two months in his presence, he still had the capacity to astonish me. Would it still be that way in a year or so?

I had no doubt.

The film played again, and for a while, I lay there, zoning out as I envisioned all the ways I’d satisfy him later. Perhaps I’d suggest the introduction of nipple clamps, have him squirming and squealing with pain and pleasure, see if he could be coaxed into coming just from tugging on the chains.

I grinned to myself, but even the promise of his raw, puffy chest and pretty pleas wasn’t enough to withstand the singing. Once my cock had flagged, I could only concentrate on the filthy fantasies for so long before the assault on my eardrums became too much.

It was incessant.

Thankfully, it ended just as I felt the urge to flee through the window. That would have been rather counterproductive, considering my plans.

Isaac nudged me to sit up, his bottom lip already between his teeth. “So, did you like it? ”

No . “It was interesting.”

“You hated it.”

“No.” Yes . “It was a musical,” I stated. The less I said, the less I had to lie to him, though he appeared mildly offended by my attempts.

“What have you got against musicals?”

“They are generally very upbeat and... musical.”

“Enlightening,” he drawled, donning a bland stare. “Tell me, are you a complete troglodyte or have you been to the theatre?”

I hummed. “I do rather enjoy the theatre, I’ll have you know. Especially the tragedies. They are invigorating.”

“Well then, you should have liked this because that ending was absolutely tragic .”

One word for it. “Yes.”

“And it was eccentric.”

My eyes narrowed. “I’m sensing that you are trying to make a connection here that I am failing to pick up on.”

“Maybe.”

“Brat.”

He smiled, his eyes lowering to his fingers as they fiddled in his lap. “Thank you for indulging me. I needed it.”

“Of course. I enjoy your company immensely, my dear, even if it involves the ambience of awful singing.” He huffed a laugh through his nose, and the attitude behind such a simple gesture was enough to reignite the hunger I’d felt before. “Now, though...” I peeled the blanket off my legs, propping myself on my knees with the intent of straddling him. “The delicious jealousy you displayed an hour ago, I would very much like to revisit it.”

He sputtered indignantly. “I wasn’t jealous. When was I—”

“Hush.” I touched a finger to his lips before bringing our faces closer. “Don’t ruin my vision.”

I descended, my mouth capturing his in a bruising lock that was more passion than skill. My arousal twitched with renewed interest, my belly heating with want as his musky scent filled my nose, his hands grabbing at me wherever he could reach. The throaty little noises he made against my lips had me palming myself through my trousers, shivering into the pressure yet hoping to stave off the worst of the ache. At least until I had us both naked.

Isaac tugged at my shirt, wordlessly steering me towards his lap, not once parting, even for air. However, just as I was about to heed his demand, and get the show in motion, a small black shadow bobbed in my periphery, barging into the space between us and taking up residence beside my human.

I jerked back with an instinctive hiss, hackles raised. “Hades’ sacred taint, what is—”

It was a cat.

The pitch-black spherical shadow... was a cat.

How had it crossed through my wards? Only Isaac, his family, and I should have

been able to access and egress the apartment. All other beings, alive or dead, would hit a brick wall if they attempted it .

Unless it had been hiding here when I'd set them.

I waved a hand, but it was entirely unbothered. Or stupid. One of the two. "Away, creature," I commanded. "There is nothing for you here."

It didn't budge.

"Aw, leave her be," Isaac said, batting my hand away and cooing softly at the little beast when it nudged against him for more pets. I glared at it. "How have you not met her? She belongs to the neighbour you want to kill. I think. She sneaks in sometimes to sleep on my bed. I honestly don't know how, but she's such a sweetie pie. Her name's Moxie."

I should've known that the blasted neighbour had something to do with it.

"Well met," I deadpanned, baring fang as the interruption to our activities warranted. "But we were busy , so shoo..."

I prodded its belly pooch, but instead of scampering off as I'd hoped, the beast took my touch as an invitation and tiptoed into my lap. So bewildering was its impertinence that I froze with my hands up as it balanced on hind legs to brush a furry cheek against my chin, tail swishing under my nose and making me sputter. Bold as brass, the pest decided then to curl itself into a ball across my knees, making the most irritating kneading motions, and vibrating.

I blinked in confusion.

There must have been an expression on my face that Isaac found hilarious, because

he doubled over, laughing until tears poured from his eyes .

“I can’t breathe,” he wheezed, clutching at his stomach. “It hurts.”

“Pleased you find it amusing, dear .” I huffed giving the pet name the same inflection I would a curse. Though, despite the hair now sticking to my clothes like mould on fresh fruit, the sound of his joy was heart-warming, so I resigned myself to letting it happen.

“She likes you,” he pointed out, unhelpfully, wiping at the wet tracks on his cheeks.

I hummed. “Excellent judge of character, I suppose.”

Isaac snorted, but instead of rescuing me, he rose from the sofa. “Guess I’ll go start dinner, and leave you two to get better acquainted.” He tapped my shoulder as he passed, smiling impishly, his lips still swollen and red from our kiss. “Then she might leave you alone.”

“But...”

He leaned down, kissing me quiet. “I can fuck you later, or whatever your plans were, when we don’t have company.”

Once he’d disappeared into the kitchen, I stared down at the beast in my lap, already sound asleep—presumably exhausted from its meddling. Normally, I’d respect a creature for its penchant for mischief, but when they were my desires being denied, it wasn’t as entertaining.

If this was what devotion entailed, some reconsideration may be in order.

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Chapter eleven

ISAAC

The Flower Festival was in full swing. The vendors were selling their wares, the shows were in action, and the crowds had descended. For a flora-loving introvert like me, it was paradise and purgatory, all in one.

Yesterday, Ash and I had spent the day leisurely scouring the showgrounds, browsing the exhibits and stalls—from engraved gardening tools to handmade pots. We'd stuffed our faces with all the delicious food and watched various displays and expert talks.

We'd had fun, we'd laughed a lot, and his company was appreciated, but the energy had shifted today. An even greater flood of spectators and contestants bustled around, waiting for the main event.

It's finally here...

As we went through the motions of setting up my workbench, I glanced around the busy marquee at the other participants, at the heaps of talent in this space alone, and nervousness sizzled under my skin. There was excitement there, too. Of course there was. But being in here, in full view, confined to my corner by an intense current of sounds and smells, had my flight reflexes pulsing. I tried to stay positive, to boldly wear the confidence I'd newly rediscovered, but I hadn't quite anticipated just how overwhelming and fucking scary all of this would be.

I was bricking it.

“You’re tense,” Ash said as he appeared behind me, seemingly out of nowhere, and although I was fully used to his antics by now, I still flinched.

“I hate how you do that.”

“Do what, petal?”

“Sneak up on me, then read me like a picture book.”

He hummed, and that signature smirk of his spread across his face. “You are as transparent as a dragonfly wing, my dear. Though, I do wish I could read thoughts. It would have made the last few centuries that much more eventful. Can you imagine how entertaining it would be to so effortlessly exploit a being’s greatest fears? What an intoxicating thought.”

Not the word I’d have used.

“You’re kinda deranged.”

“It’s pronounced demon , petal.” He plucked a rose from its bucket, twisting the stem between his long fingers, but instead of chiding him for messing with the inventory, I tracked the movement, knowing exactly how good that strumming motion felt on my —

“You’re staring.”

My gaze darted up to meet his smug one, and I scoffed, refusing to give him the satisfaction of knowing just how much he affected me. “You’re dicking about; course I’m staring.” I turned away, busying myself with stacking bricks of floral foam, or

whatever else demanded none of my attention. “Just behave yourself.”

“What will you do if I don’t?” The flower he’d been toying with swept across my nape, the tickle of velvet petals causing goosebumps to prickle in their wake. “I think you should punish me, sweetling. I’ll even show you how.”

An undignified snort erupted from my throat, and I reached back to shove his face away. His human tongue flicked out to playfully lave at my thumb before I could pull it away.

“Stop being a pest,” I hissed half-heartedly. “I need to focus.”

“You need an orgasm,” he said, thankfully lowering his voice. “There was a quiet little nook over by the Marigold Garden. If you’re silent, we won’t be discovered, and you know I can be quick.”

“You’re impossible.” I huffed, though the idea was tempting. Under any other circumstances, I’d have taken him up on the offer without hesitation, but right now, I couldn’t afford any distractions.

No matter how relaxing they promised to be.

Ducking under his arm, I ignored his pout, taking stock of my stall to be sure everything was there before the first round began. It would be a bit tough titty, if it wasn’t. The shop was four hours away, but I supposed a powerful demon was at my disposal, if push came to shove. I’d never dream of cheating or giving myself an unfair advantage, even if Ash would revel in that kind of mischief. I wanted to get through this as independently as possible, but if I discovered I’d left my favourite shears in my back room, well, needs must.

The ruffle of a tent flap secured my attention, and one by one the judges wandered in

to take their seats behind the podium. There were show officials filtering in and out, checking and double checking to make sure everything was ready, ensuring rules and regulations were being followed. A camera crew came next, weaving through the mob to set up tripods while others spread out amongst the contestants, being sure to catch every single angle imaginable.

Spectators were last. Flocking into every available space, chattering among themselves, and ramping up the heavy atmosphere tenfold.

My heart picked up speed.

My throat tightened.

It's starting.

The grounding warmth of Ash's solid body settled against my back, the ghost of his breath fanning over my ear. "Calm yourself, petal," he whispered. "Everything will be fine. I know you can do it."

I believed it. Or at least it felt more achievable than it had before. If only the situation didn't have me so on edge.

"What if I lose?" I said.

"You won't."

"How can you be certain?"

He spun me to face him, his expression more serious than I'd ever seen it. "Because I know what you're capable of, and everyone here pales in comparison." Soft hands bracketed my cheeks, thumbs sweeping as if brushing my freckles. "I can't promise

you'll win, but I can promise you'll do your best and be recognised for it. How could you not be?"

The sincerity in his eyes made the rising worry ease a little, my chest and shoulders feeling looser and lighter already. "Don't tell Wayne, but I think you've taken his place as my number one supporter."

Huffing a laugh, he smiled and rested his forehead against mine. "You'd be wise to remember it, my darling."

I released a steadying breath, nodding once before retreating.

He was right. I could do this. I'd made it to this stage, into this tent, because I was at least as good as everyone else.

I just had to prove it.

"Welcome, all, to the thirtieth annual Sunday Show, the country's most anticipated floral competition, where our best and brightest will battle it out for the title of Florist of the Year!" The contest official stood on the platform at the front of the tent, addressing the cameras and the masses alike, microphone in hand. He performed mostly for the TV show, exaggerating his speech and looking every bit the eccentric presenter I'd expected him to be.

From his feather boa to his tri-coloured waistcoat, he blended in well.

I'd even caught Ash giving an appreciative nod at his attire.

"We'll get to the part you're all here for in just a moment," the host added with a sunny smile on his maroon-painted lips. "But first, let me run you through the slight adjustments to this year's rules and agenda..."

The contestants had already been briefed on how the day would pan out. The first two arrangements would be Judges' Choice. We had ninety minutes to make a Christmas wreath for round one, and sixty minutes for a wedding centrepiece for the second. At the end of each round, the judges would pick who was to proceed to the next based on execution, technique, punctuality, and imagination—the unique twist we incorporated into our pieces. There would be a small break to allow those who were unsuccessful to vacate the tent, and then we'd have two hours to create our showpieces for the final.

Easy enough.

In theory.

“Is that all clear?” The host waited for the crowd's agreement, laughing at the sheer volume of impatient yeses thrown his way. “Very well then, I think it's about time we get this show on the road, don't you?” He paused again for the roaring applause, and my stomach dropped to my arse.

The weight of hundreds of eyes tracking my movements as I shifted nervously behind my stall had me wringing my hands to release the tension.

Fuuuuck.

“Contestants, are you ready?”

No.

“Then, on your marks...” He delayed for dramatic effect. “Get set...” The sudden silence in the marquee was deafening. “Go!”

I fumbled with my chicken wire and moss ring at first, the klaxon making my fingers

shake. But after a deep breath and a shoulder squeeze from Ash, I managed to tune out the surrounding buzz.

My attention narrowed to my hands as they went through the motions I'd done a hundred times before. Wreaths had always been popular, even when my shop wasn't, and they were one of my favourite arrangements to make. They could be simple or showy, bright or muted, and with the Christmas theme, I was excited to assemble the vision in my mind.

Ash did whatever was instructed of him, be it cutting stalks or weaving Stewart tartan bows around sticks of cinnamon, and he did so without complaint. There was a brief incident when he flagged down my attention just to snicker and point out that the anthuriums vaguely resembled an overly red cock and balls. But that aside, he was on his best behaviour.

An indulgent smile crept onto my face as I gauged my progress. Instead of using holly for the base like many of the other contestants, I sporadically placed branches of green kangaroo paw—a sculptural backdrop for the thistles and abracadabra roses I'd tucked in between. Already, I was proud of what I'd put together, and by the time the ninety minutes were up, I was damn near vibrating out of my skin with anticipation to show it off.

I was casually nestling a pinecone into the last gap when the klaxon sounded, signalling the end of the round.

“Drop your tools and step back from your workbenches,” the official instructed, and I did so, chewing my bottom lip as I studied my creation.

It was maximalist, for sure, but it was ‘Christmas,’ and with a quick scan around, I thought it was different enough to scrape through. Unless the judges have no taste, the voice in my head uttered, and it sounded too much like Ash for comfort.

I swore, he had better not be palming his arrogance off on me.

Or hiding his ability to communicate telepathically.

The judges took a leisurely lap of the tent, thoroughly assessing each contestant's work before returning to select their favourites for the next round. They offered handshakes as a signal of your fate. If you received one, you were through. If you didn't ...

Well, it was home time.

It had to be amongst the best moments of my life when I was one of the first to be picked. The surge of confidence that burst in my belly had me expecting to look down and find myself hovering above the ground.

Ash was at my side, grinning like the cat that ate the canary, and I couldn't even find it in myself to roll my eyes. "Let me guess, you told me so ?"

"Mhm." He huffed a cocky little laugh, and gave me a quick kiss on the temple. "I must admit, it is exhilarating being right all the time."

Still soaring from the minor win, the next round seemed to go off without a hitch. I flitted around with a spring in my step, beaming like I owned the sun and positive that nothing could ever ruin my good mood.

Until it did.

The goal was a teardrop centrepiece. It wasn't a new or innovative design, but after the extravagance of the first round, I thought it was best to dial it back and try something chic and elegant to show the range in my repertoire.

Probably would've been a brilliant idea had half the flowers I'd chosen not disintegrated in my hands as soon as I picked them up.

“What the hell—” I brought the bucket to my nose, blanching as the acrid scent of disinfectant hit me at force. “There's bleach in the water. ”

Ash's gaze flamed before turning dark and murderous—thankfully with his back to the cameras. Under any other circumstances it would have turned me on seeing him so riled up on my behalf, ready to bring hell down upon whoever was responsible, but I was too ruffled for that right now.

“Someone has sabotaged you?”

That had been my initial thought as well, but then the events of the morning played out in my head, and realisation dawned.

Scrubbing a hand across my face, I sighed. “No, I... I mustn't have screwed the cap on the bottle properly. There was a fucking wet patch in the boot of my car, but I thought it was water. I didn't think to check if anything had leaked into the buckets.”

“Put them back, and I'll fix it,” Ash offered, implying magic with a flex of his fingers. I shook my head, eyeing the camera that was pointed directly at my station, helpfully capturing the entire disaster as it unfolded.

“It's too risky,” I said. “I'll just have to use something else. What white flowers are left?”

Ash cringed. “Calla lilies.”

Fuck .

There was simple, and then there was using lilies for a fucking wedding arrangement, but I had no choice. It was those or nothing, and even if part of me was chanting to throw in the towel now, I refused to give up .

“They’ll do.” I scrabbled for my shears and began snipping off stalks.

Everything was hazy, my laser focus on situating the flowers so perfectly that their plainness would be overlooked. I fluffed out the arrangement with greenery, aiming for a more rustic, forest-fairy beauty instead of the classic refinery. I’d restarted twice, first unhappy with the shape, then angry that the petals weren’t falling in the direction I’d wanted them to. I got myself on track eventually, but I’d wasted so much time, and there were still so many flaws.

Maybe I could borrow some spares from a neighbouring stall, replace the lilies with literally anything else, or add in a few—

“Time’s up!” the host called, and I recoiled in alarm.

The timer had crept up on me, and as I stood there with a white lily between my fingers, staring down at my piece—barely finished and not at all what I’d envisioned—I felt my whole body drain of energy.

It’s not enough.

This time, when the judges did their inspections, it felt like hours instead of minutes. All I could do was disappear into my head, listen to the voices scrutinising my work, criticising everything I’d missed, and finding fault. It had only taken one hurdle to sweep my feet out from under me, to topple the illusion of smooth sailing. Anyone else would’ve had backups, would’ve shrugged and moved on without spending so much time faffing around over details that didn’t fucking matter. I shouldn’t have chosen simplicity. I should’ve gone all out and piggybacked off the vibes of my last

piece—the reason they’d put me through.

Why, today of all days, had I decided to be such an idiot?

My feet were restless with the wait, tapping out a rhythm as my eyes tracked the judges like a hawk’s, stomach twisting as spot after spot for the final was filled, but not by me. Ash laced his fingers through mine, a silent reassurance, though a tally from the host had my anxiety rising.

There was one space left, and when the judges drifted closer to my table, my breath caught in my lungs. They seemed to be debating between three of us, humming and hawing as if we weren’t all dying for the results. None of our arrangements were similar, not even the general shape, and mine was, without question, the simplest. One lass had gone for a tropical theme, all yellows, blues, and pinks, while the other had captured full glamour with glitter-dipped petals and gold accents—probably something Ash would have created.

I stood no chance.

Except, defying all rationality, one of the judges broke away from the group and strode towards me, a friendly smile on her face, her hand extended. It genuinely felt like a dream, and the relief that swept through me once her fingers uncurled from mine had my knees buckling, the thundering applause a distant warble in my ears.

I may have teared up .

Sagging onto the table like a puppet without strings, my head fell into my hands, and Ash rubbed soothing circles on my back, cooing softly.

“Well done, pet,” he said before fetching a bottle of water and urging me to drink. I did so on autopilot, parched yet barely registering the coolness sliding down my dry

throat as I keenly observed the unsuccessful participants packing up their stalls with dejected expressions before leaving the tent.

That could have been me.

What if I'm next?

I'd scraped through by the skin of my teeth, and highly doubted I'd be so lucky a second time, especially when I hadn't yet decided on the design for my showpiece and only had two hours to pull it off. I'd brought all of my supplies with me, every last flower and stand, in the hopes that something would spark in the moment. That I'd have this great epiphany and it would all work out fine.

But even as the crowd and official counted down from three, the alarm blared, and the other finalists got stuck in, I was completely blank.

Pressure built, the feeling of being way out of my depth crushing against my chest. I hadn't prepared for this to be so frantic and fast paced. I hadn't really prepared at all.

People studied me from the sidelines, spectators gawking at my inaction as they chatted among themselves, snacks in hand like they were at the pictures. The judges watched me and whispered, probably wondering why the hell I was the only one just standing behind my table like a deer in headlights.

What was it I'd said about believing in myself?

Was it too late to reconsider?

"I lied," I mumbled to no one in particular, taking slow, steady breaths so I didn't hyperventilate. "I can't do this. I really can't do this."

Ash was there in an instant, guiding me into a chair at the side as he crouched between my legs. He had that look in his eyes again, the one I'd noticed the other day but hadn't dared to hope meant anything. His hands were warm and gentle as they stroked my thighs, the touch distracting enough to curb the welling panic. I swallowed around the lump in my throat.

"You can do anything, petal," he said once I was more aware, the world around us no longer muddled and foggy as if underwater, but still narrowed down to him and me. "I do not throw my belief around blindly. If you were not capable, you'd have received no lies from me, but Isaac..." He cradled my hand in his, caressing my knuckles with the pad of his thumb. "You are the most impressive little creature I have ever met. You have managed to astound me at every turn, and have become something of great importance to me."

There was a brief pause before a soft laugh escaped him, as if he'd come to some sort of internal conclusion. He entwined our fingers, bringing them to his lips. "Be it by mistake, fate, or intention, I am glad that you summoned me. "

I shook my head, a stray tear rolling down my cheek. "You're only saying that because you have no choice. Once you're free, you'll forget me."

An alien expression flickered over Ash's face. Was that... guilt? "The spell is already broken," he admitted, lowering our hands but not letting go. My brow furrowed. "You freed me the moment you realised your worth, and I'm still here, exactly where I want to be. With you, my darling."

My chest was tight for another reason entirely now, my heart threatening to leap straight out of my throat. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"This is new territory for me," he said, and it was a shock to see him deliberately being so vulnerable, laying his emotions bare out in the open for anyone to

see—cameras, contestants, everyone. I bit my tongue to stifle even my weakest of breaths. I didn't want to miss a single word, or cause him to stop. "I had to be sure that my feelings for you weren't a product of the spell. I now know, without a shadow of a doubt, that they are not."

I sniffed. "It's not just the Stockholm talking?"

"Come now, do you think I would place my heart so deliberately in the hands of just anyone?" He gave me a pointed look, making me snort—the sound was wet and gross, but he didn't seem to care. A testament to his affections, to be sure. "No, the adoration I feel for you has come naturally. It is not forced, it is not required. It is strange, as I've never known it, but that makes it no less true. I cannot promise I will excel at romance, my dear, you may need to be patient as I navigate, but I'll try. Be assured that, for you, I'd do anything."

As far as declarations went, it was pretty darn perfect, though it wouldn't have been Ash if he hadn't tacked on, "However, I do excel at everything else, so why would this be any different?"

I shook my head in fond exasperation. "What about your home?"

"Well, I happen to have grown quite accustomed to a cosy little flat above a very pretty flower shop." He propped himself on my knees, rising to brush his lips tauntingly over mine before dropping his voice to a filthy rumble. "The bed, especially, is extremely comfortable. The company is not bad, either."

"You want to live with me?"

"My dear," he purred, smirking wickedly. "I already do."

With a laugh, I tangled my fingers in his hair and kissed him as if it were the first

time, giving zero shits about the possibility that it could be shown on TV. I wanted everyone to know. Wanted them to see that he was mine and I was his , and witness just how fucking electric the spark was that burned between us.

I'd never expected reciprocation. I'd known about my own feelings for weeks and been aware of our compatibility even earlier than that, but I'd been terrified of offering up my heart only for it to be broken whenever he left. To find out that he'd been harbouring the same feelings, to know that he cared for me as much as I cared for him had adrenaline rushing through my veins, triggering the swell of confidence that had wavered.

The contest.

Ash, ever observant, withdrew, and kissed the tip of my nose before standing. He held out his hand, smiling broadly. Everything is okay. "Now, enough dawdling. Tell me the plan so you can win that trophy."

I took his offered hand with an enthusiastic nod, an idea rushing to me as soon as my gaze landed on my worktable, on the orange phoenix feather and the sunny tarot card peeking out from one of the baskets.

I know exactly what to do.

"And in third place... Isaac Miller from Miller's Meadow!"

Tears streamed down my face as I weaved through the cheering crowd, my shoulders numb from the congratulatory taps of my peers. My legs shook as I climbed onto the podium, palms still smudged with soil and flecked with leaves, sweating as the bronze trophy was handed over to me.

The weight of it felt solid and real.

Not a dream.

The cameras panned to me, but my gaze drifted to my workbench, to the arrangement standing proudly on display. It was a phoenix—could it really have been anything else? Its fiery, cascading tail was built from sunflowers and Naranja roses, its head a bird of paradise, and my cheeks ached with the width of my smile. I was thrilled. It was beautiful. A showpiece worthy of third place.

I sought out Ash, our eyes locking through the crowd, and his mirroring grin was all delight and affection. It said ‘I had faith in you; you deserve this,’ and two months ago, I wouldn’t have believed him, but now...

How could I not?

After my brother had slipped me the address of that magic shop, when the man behind the counter had promised to make all of my dreams come true, I hadn’t believed him either. I’d thought I was a lost cause. That even if spells and hexes were real, I didn’t deserve their help or guidance.

But fate had a wicked sense of humour, and the magic I’d once refused to acknowledge was the reason I now felt happier than I ever had before.

Demon summoning, as it turned out, was definitely not a crock of shite.

THREE MONTHS LATER

AMADEUS

“A re you ready, petal?” I smirked down at the resplendent creature below me, my belly heating with a want that hadn’t dwindled a day since our first meeting.

He was naked, while I stayed fully clothed. Well, naked except for the orange ropes that were woven around his torso, trussing him up like the prize that he was. They also coiled around his legs and arms, keeping him restrained to the bench that he lay upon. I stood astride him, my legs at either side of his hips, my skirt pooling over his thighs, my feet planted firmly on the ground. I wouldn’t lower myself until he’d given his approval, but judging by the way he was practically drooling, I’d say it would soon be granted.

My Isaac was so eager to please, and endearingly curious. After so many months together, he’d grown more aware of the extent of my experience in the bedroom—the vast range of depravities I enjoyed—and had offered himself up as my sacrifice, asking to be introduced to something new every so often.

He really was a gem.

I wasn’t bored of our intimacies—on the contrary, sex could never be boring whenever a demon was involved—but it couldn’t be denied that a special thrill rolled through my core whenever a little extra spice was added on occasion. Knowing I was responsible for teaching my darling different ways to seek pleasure, for testing the waters of his boundaries, and being the one—the only one—to guide him through

new territory, was all incredibly rewarding.

There was also the matter of Isaac's reactions: all those delicious sounds and facial expressions. It was like a fun little game—how many could be milked from him before he sobbed for release—and I immensely enjoyed playing it.

“Ready as ever,” the sweetling responded with a restricted smile. He shifted in place, but it accomplished nothing bar an arch to his hips.

“Are you uncomfortable?”

“No, no,” he protested, relaxing slightly, though it was clear that something was amiss. I gave him a beat to chew his lip and reflect, and eventually he peered up at me with a sheepish grimace. “I think I’m a little nervous.”

“Do you wish for me to untie you? We can still carry on without the use of restraints.”

“No, I like them.” He tightened his fists, almost defensively. “They’re hot.”

With a hand braced beside his head and the other cupping his chin, I lowered my face parallel to his, our bodies not touching. “I won’t ever hurt you, darling. Unless you ask.”

“I know,” he said with a faint snort. “I trust you.”

A gentle smile—and, really, how long had that taken to become a standard?—flitted at the corner of my mouth as the metal tip of my claw-cuff traced the sweet brown constellations peppering his cheekbone. “And you’re still a fool for it.”

“I’m your fool,” he declared, voice barely above a whisper yet genuine. I nodded, kissing the bridge of his nose.

“ Mine .”

The shiver that wracked his frame felt like success, sweet and fulfilling. He adjusted under me once again, his scent now infused with anticipation, his grin more enthusiastic when he said, “Okay, I’m ready now.”

My lips curled wickedly.

Play time.

After a teasing flicker of my tapered tongue at the corner of his mouth, I straightened, rearranging my long, silken skirt to finally let my arse sink into his lap, drawing out his first moan. “Good pet.”

The praise had his eyelids dipping, his body going soft and pliant as he surrendered completely to my mercy. With a quick flex of my fingers, I manifested a fragment of my power into my palms, a globe of flame hovering in each. It was hot, but it wouldn’t scald him. I had more control than that. They were mostly an illusion, just enough heat to be startling, but never to hurt him. Slowly, I lowered my hands, keeping an inch of space between his skin and mine, getting him used to the sensation before gliding them over his torso.

Almost instantly, Isaac’s skin bloomed pink and he gasped, mouth forming a perfect O.

I chuckled softly. “You like that?”

“It’s... different,” he said, his husky tone making my mouth water. “ Good different.”

“Pleased to hear it.”

With that, I closed the gap, kneading his flesh and drawing the most guttural sound

from deep in his throat. At the same time, I aligned my hips perfectly to his, gifting him a rasp of friction as my fingers danced over his ribs like they were playing an accordion, heat pulsing low then high, my metal claws staying cool in contrast.

A sharp intake of breath met my ears as the dripping head of his cock rubbed against the bulge in my skirt; the sound so addictive that I couldn't help rolling forward again just to replay it.

Isaac's back arched a fraction with each movement, an involuntary twitch against the taunting weight, but he didn't seek more than he was given. I could almost hear the cogs churning in his stubborn little mind, conjuring up unpleasant visions to delay the inevitable .

My pet was forever conscious of seeming too needy, as if a glimmer of self-doubt still lingered even after all the progress he'd made. It was possible that it wouldn't disappear entirely, that he'd spend the rest of his life subconsciously chasing reassurance, but that suited our dynamic just fine. As it happened, I thrived on the neediness he ultimately showed during our intimacies, revelled in him letting go of his control and being so desperate, so dependent on me that he barely had the opportunity to dwell on anything else insignificant.

Perhaps not what humans would define as healthy , but my demon nature spoke for itself on that front.

“Don't hold yourself back, petal,” I encouraged, pressing myself more insistently against his hardness, delighting in the choked whimper I received in return. “I want you needy and desperate. As long as you remember who's in charge of your pleasure.”

Isaac sighed as if grateful for the chance to let go, and started bucking upward, tentative at first, but growing more and more frantic as my hips and magic synced with his pace. In no time at all, the dual sensations had him struggling against his

bonds, head thrown back, teeth bared. Spit gathered at the corners of his mouth as he sucked in breathless gulps of air, his hair stuck to the sweat beading at his temples, so close to unravelling at the seams.

The smug swell of my chest was inevitable.

“My, my, you really are enjoying this, aren’t you?” I cooed, feeling the muscles under my hot palms bunch and flex. “You could come for me right now if I demanded it, couldn’t you, my darling?”

Isaac nodded, teeth nipping at his bottom lip as if to stop it wobbling, and I hummed in sympathy. His quick trigger was flattering, really. He wasn’t entirely without stamina—I knew, as I’d been the one to nurture him out of that fumbling virgin phase—but it was gratifying to be reminded of my skill. Of how well attuned I was to his body’s every desire.

Drawing it out all night, letting his interest creep leisurely through the stages would be a breeze, if I wished it so, but that was a rare treat. Having my pet ravenous, a begging mess just aching for relief, was how I liked him best.

The delightful creature whined as the pads of my middle fingers skated over his nipples, his hips stuttering, urgently chasing release. The rich, spicy scent of him filled the room, and I knew it wouldn’t take more than thirty seconds for him to fall apart...

Pity .

I lifted off of him just enough that no amount of thrusting into the air had our hips meeting. Isaac cried out, a look of betrayal and hopeless desperation flashing across his pretty face as he shivered.

He was so beautiful.

“W-Why’d you stop?”

“Because I want you desperate,” I reminded him with a mocking smirk. “So tell me, are you feeling positively unhinged, pet? Or will it take more work on my part? ”

He gritted his teeth in a weak snarl. “Fuck. You.”

That answers that.

“We’ll get there,” I teased, relishing in his glare. “Oh, don’t worry. You’ll get to come; I just haven’t specified when.”

I ran my hands—now sans flames—soothingly over his pecs as my gaze levelled on his. “Remember, we can stop at any time. You need only ask.”

His expression softened at that, his body visibly relaxing. “I don’t want to stop.”

“Pleased to hear it.” I combed my fingers through his blond curls, content to watch him settle, while luxuriating in the fondness that stirred in my gut.

Ever since my confession of feelings at his flower show, they’d hummed a constant melody under my skin, but seeing him like this, laid bare and trusting, made me realise just how loud they could be. How deep they ran in my veins. I adored him, that much was obvious, but it was also an infatuation. An obsession more resilient than any I’d had before. I was never absent of thoughts for him, nor had I tired of homing every last speck of my attention on one, singular being. The more I had of him, the more attached I became, and though I’d already banished the very notion of ever wanting another, it was still surprising that someone like myself was capable of such monogamy.

My siblings, no doubt, would have a field day.

Isaac's breathing evened out first, his heart rate following suit, and only then did my magic reignite—a low, pulsating heat gathering in my idle palm, eager to meet his skin once more. I took hold of my human's cock, humming appreciatively at the heavy weight of every glorious inch in my hand before giving it a single, leisurely stroke, my thumb skimming over the wet slit. He smelled like sex, lust, and impatience. It was delicious, and watching him cant his hips, back bowing obscenely as he thrust into the loose circle of my fingers was a religious experience—as if I had any clue what those felt like.

“You have such a pretty cock,” I observed, letting out a breathy little rasp as I lined him up to the bulge in my skirts and curled my fist tightly around us both. “So thick and flushed, and always so wet, just for me.”

I could've undressed, could've given in to the temptation of skin-on-skin contact, but something about my clothed cock sliding against his bare one felt slightly more depraved—the fabric darkening with our combined slick, the subtle creases in the silk creating extra stimulation. Obscene .

Small whimpers broke from Isaac's lips, shivers rolling through his body whenever I began rocking into each stroke. He was so responsive, clinging to his restraints like he wanted to be moulded to the bench, his grip so strong it'd bruise if he were clutching at my thighs or hips.

Compared to our very first encounter, he gave everything he had so much more freely now, submitting with little to no hesitation, and it was more than I could ever have hoped for.

More than I could ever have imagined I deserved .

“Ash, please...”

My eyes flicked to his, my chest tightening at the look of pure despair on his face.

“What do you need, my dear?”

“I want you to ride me.”

I barely concealed my smirk. “How bold of you. Is my hand not good enough?”

“Yes— ngh—but your arse is better,” he stated with zero regard to my teasing lilt.

He also wasn’t wrong.

“Naturally,” I said with an air of certainty as I ruminated over his request. I had planned to see him a bit more wanton before sinking down on his beautiful cock, but plans could change.

The thought of him filling me, his tip nudging against my sweet spot as my magic expanded from my fingers, tingling up the length of my arms and over my body, had my hole clenching on nothing.

Empty .

I wouldn’t fuck him to completion, or seek my own release. Not yet. I’d set the pace to glacial, my hole doing nothing more than warming his cock as my hands did the rest, tormenting him with flames until he was on the brink of insanity...

“Alright, I’m convinced,” I declared in response to that particularly delightful line of thought. Isaac was clearly too distracted by sensation to comment on my swift decision-making, only managing a choked-out moan as I gave his cock one last squeeze before shuffling into a better position .

With a renewed sense of urgency, I clicked my fingers, and my hole was stretched and slick, ready for him. My underwear vanished, but my clothes stayed on—to maintain the appearance of a power imbalance, of course. I hiked my skirt up my

thighs with an eagerness that probably looked frantic, before hovering above him, taking his shaft in my hand to angle him just right, and—

Meow.

My spine stiffened, and despite my typically impeccable control, two events happened in quick succession. The force of my glare toward the furry culprit caused my balance to falter, and the split second of alarm that followed wrenched a globe of fire from my fingertips, its heat searing a large, gaping hole into the sofa. Before I could even curse the creature for its involvement, or truly grasp my already precarious position, Issac's hips bucked in surprise, sending me toppling to the floor in a heap.

Pain wasn't something I paid heed to, but my elbow hitting the cheap carpet didn't exactly tickle.

A cacophony of heavy breaths and the crackle of scorching leather accompanied the silence that otherwise cloaked the room like a fog—the type of silence that never failed to make itself known after a painfully embarrassing ordeal—and I was so stunned that it took several moments of blinking up at the newly painted ceiling, clutching my arm, before I could break it .

With all the power in my chest, I manifested, “Your neighbour is going to die.”

“Someone needs to,” Isaac gritted through obviously clenched teeth, and my thirst for blood was temporarily waylaid by the pride swelling in my belly. I smirked to myself.

The little creature had a venomous streak, after all.

After another beat, he sighed, his prickly demeanour easing. “But as pissed off as I am at being royally cockblocked, the cat does what it wants. It's not Kevin's fault.”

“I beg to differ,” I grumbled, but as if to prove Isaac’s point, the infernal beast jumped onto my chest, attesting to its owner’s innocence. I reached out to stroke it reluctantly. “Twice now, it has interrupted my plans to ravage you. That cannot be a coincidence. Either your neighbour is spying on us, and sends the creature purposefully to vex me, or the little thing has a mind of its own and disapproves of our activities.”

“Well, if you’re suggesting killing the cat, I’m going to have to—”

I gasped, clutching at the pest before even realising what I was doing. “What kind of heathen do you take me for?”

Isaac hummed, and it sounded amused. “The kind who lays on the floor petting said cat instead of untying me.”

I was on my feet in an instant, waving to swiftly dispense of the ropes. “Forgive me,” I uttered with more remorse than I’d ever thought myself capable, and helped him sit. A glass of water materialised in one hand, a cold, wet cloth in the other .

I handed the glass to Isaac, coaxing him into taking small sips as I wiped him down, paying extra attention to the nest of curls on his belly. My magic could’ve rendered him spotless in seconds, but there was a particular kind of intimacy in manually cleaning a partner—one that I’d discovered was immensely fulfilling.

My human’s cock had flagged, obviously , which was a crying shame, but it was the middle of the afternoon. Orgasms could still be on the agenda. After a brief respite.

“You’re getting better at the aftercare stuff,” he pointed out, watching me intently, a fond smile on his flushed face.

“I do have the most excellent tutor.” I winked salaciously, earning a laugh.

“We make the perfect pair. You’re teaching me the filthy stuff, and I’m teaching you sweetness. It works.”

I nodded in agreement, and with a wave, I sent his empty glass to the kitchen and the cloth to the bathroom. “Are you alright?” I said, reaching out to tuck a stray curl behind his ear, huffing lightly. “Not that I’m any less livid at the disturbance, but I am somewhat glad I hadn’t put you inside me. This could have been a lot worse.”

Isaac cringed at the implication, his thighs pressing together. “I don’t really want to think about that. Are you okay? You fell, did you hit your—”

“I’m fine, pet.” I lay my hand on top of his flailing one, halting the impending fussing. His concern really was endearing, but wholly unnecessary. “I may have to update the wards, though. No cats allowed.”

Isaac pouted, peering at the cat over the side of the bench, who’d taken to licking itself in the most undignified position. “But that’s so mean. She just wants company... or entertainment?” He looked down at his nakedness and snorted. “She must be pretty bloody bored at her own house if she’s coming here for that. Or just a fuzzy little pervert.”

I studied the beast, how its red tongue combed through the fur on its belly pooch as it maintained an unnerving level of eye contact. My nose wrinkled with distaste.

The latter.

“I mean...” Isaac carried on, humour in his tone. “She probably had fun watching you blow a hole in the sofa. Great shot, by the way.”

My gaze drifted to the still-smoking cavity in the aforementioned furniture, and I hummed. “The creature certainly has a taste for chaos. I would have respected that if it wasn’t such an inconvenience.”

Isaac laughed—despite what I’d said not being particularly amusing—and the sound was so carefree and infectious that I couldn’t help but join in.

We sat there for however long, revelling in each other’s mirth, saying nothing, but not needing to. When it eventually tapered off, Isaac just stared up at me, eyes glinting with blissful tears, and lips curved into a lazy smile. For once, I was ashamed to admit that I couldn’t quite decipher his thoughts. The impression he gave wasn’t unlike the day he’d broken the spell—the first time I’d noticed that he seemed truly and unequivocally happy.

My chest tightened, and I tilted my head, intrigued. “What is it?”

There was a pause, not a hesitation; more so a beat where he studied me even closer, seemingly enthralled by what he saw. I half expected no answer, that I would have to prompt him again, but at the tail end of a wistful sigh, he finally blurted, “I just love you.”

Reactively, I stiffened.

Isaac noticed, of course he did. It wasn’t subtle—or intentional—and much too late to play off as a shiver from the cold air filtering in through the cracked-open window. The poor, sweet-hearted creature’s eyes widened, and he was already fumbling and blushing with embarrassment.

“Shit, I’m sorry. You don’t have to say it back. I know it might be too soon for you to even—”

I kissed him.

I kissed him hard . Mostly to silence his nervous chuntering so I had the chance to process, but also because it never failed to please me how he would melt into the touch. It was as if my lips claiming his, my forked tongue coiling and seeking,

expelled all thoughts from his head. It worked in my favour: the perfect distraction.

And much more fun than simply freezing time .

In truth, I hadn't adequately prepared myself for those words to be shared—a witless error on my part, but still, he'd caught me off guard. Despite my previous aversions to sappiness, my reaction was largely due to the spontaneity of the declaration, not the declaration itself. Something I wouldn't have been able to admit so confidently before my time with Isaac .

Was that progress?

I should have expected it. The phrase was a natural progression in a human relationship—or so I'd learned—and the rushed delivery was on par with Isaac's personality, but part of me clearly wasn't yet fully in tune to their customs.

Demons did not declare themselves as vocally as humans. Not in matters of the heart. We valued actions over words, but even then, it was more to do with fealty or tolerance than devotion. Love was treated as an inconvenience, a conflict to our sinful impulses. We fucked, we killed, we caused mayhem, and that was about the extent of it. Our 'relationships' were toxic and messy. There was never a shortage of enemy heads on pikes or rival bedmates poisoned for sheer sport—acts that humans didn't often appreciate in a partner.

Isaac had shown me that the evolution of one's repertoire wasn't so terrible. That embracing something gentler, and new —and more mortal—didn't mean denying my true nature. I could still provide protection, rid the universe of anyone who dared to cause him harm, while also showering him with affection .

The best of both worlds.

Returning those three words would only endorse that. It wasn't as if I hadn't already

been attempting to treat him as such, proving in my deeds that I did, in fact, love him, so verbal confirmation wouldn't be a leap. It may feel a little strange on my tongue, granted, but it was nothing I couldn't overcome.

Plus, if the term of endearment was as important to him as I believed it to be, I wouldn't dream of withholding, no matter my inexperience with it.

I'd already challenged my instincts just by being here, at his side. I could do it again.

Gladly.

I withdrew from the kiss, chuckling softly at the dazed look in Isaac's eyes, the events of the last thirty seconds certainly forgotten.

Luckily, I was there to remind him.

"I love you, too, my darling," I said simply, cupping his cheeks and holding his gaze to emphasise my sincerity. "And even if the words don't pass my lips often, never doubt it."

An array of expressions flitted over the pretty creature's face, his complexion all but sampling every colour the rainbow had to offer. First, there was confusion, followed closely by shock and mortification, before finally settling on realisation. It was unmistakable, the moment his mind latched onto exactly what I'd said.

He beamed widely, and it was the sunshine that broke through a storm. "You do? "

Typically, I would tease him, cut through the syrupy sweetness with a witty remark, but under the weight of his unwavering attention, I couldn't summon much more than a fond smile. "How could I not?"

With a chuckle that sounded equal parts elated and relieved, Isaac hooked his arm

around my back and lifted me into his lap. I wasn't given the opportunity to marvel at the glorious show of strength before he was capturing my lips with his, silencing any gasp of surprise that may have escaped. I had no complaints. It wasn't often that he acted so brazen, and what sort of depraved being would I be if I resisted the possessive way he pinned me close?

It was a charming moment, beautiful even, and I would have been content to savour it until every breath withered from my lungs.

Alas, not everyone seemed inclined to entertain my fancies .

The height of ignorance, really.

I sensed movement from the floor—sneaky and deliberate—and refusing to be interrupted for the umpteenth time, I aimed a side-eyed glare at the meddling culprit, letting my pupils blaze fiercely in warning.

I swore I saw the beast smirk .