



Sinful (Dark Delights #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: "I have to be strong."

"You are. But you can't hold the world on your shoulders forever."

Nathan Accardi fears the Paladin Guild has lost its way. Once fearsome demon hunters, these days they spend all their energy hating a handful of people who left the guild to be with demons. In an attempt to be the voice of reason, he asks Commander Sloan to let him approach the defectors with a truce. He doesn't expect them to make a halfling demon his point of contact, but he can't blame them for being wary of him.

He feels an instant attraction to Storm. Fighting it is impossible, and against his better judgment, a night of passion turns his world on its head.

Storm has watched other demons fall for their humans, but it was never supposed to happen to him. When Nathan pulls away after their first incredible night together, Storm swears he'll do whatever it takes to make him see that they belong together.

But there are more than bloodthirsty paladins closing in. Strange deaths in the city are just the beginning. Something's coming, and if Nathan isn't careful, he'll be caught in the crossfire. Is a truce between the paladins and the rebels worth his life? Will Storm be able to save him from becoming a martyr for a truce no one else believes in?

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Page 1

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Chapter 1

Nathan

The morning dawned. That was its only worthwhile contribution to the day as Nathan Accardi strode out into the pouring rain, juggling his coffee, his keys, and the rain jacket he'd neglected to put on before walking out the front door.

The trees surrounding his humble house did little to protect him from the downfall, fat droplets dripping from the leaves and landing in uncomfortable places as he opened the driver's side door and dove inside.

He had a meeting with Commander Sloan and some of the other captains today, and anxiety churned within him. Nathan was the captain of his very own squad of demon-hunting paladins, of the Paladin Guild of Los Angeles. As such, he answered directly to Commander Derek Sloan, but things at the guild hadn't been right for a while.

Nathan used to have the utmost respect for his commander, but Sloan hadn't been the same since Alex Hawk was banished nine months ago. Nothing was the same. God, had it really been nine months? It seemed like just yesterday he was still pairing off with Alex during patrols. Alex was an angry young man but a good one. He'd been on Nathan's squad, and it felt like a bullseye had been placed on Nathan since then, like he was somehow to blame for Alex choosing a demon over his duty. Nathan hadn't understood Alex's choices any better than anyone else. He'd always liked the young man, despite his simmering anger over what had happened to his family. It was a tale of vengeance not uncommon in the guild. The difference with Alex was that he'd taken matters into his own hands. When Sloan denied him the chance to go after

the demon responsible for killing his family, Alex disobeyed and hunted it down anyway—with another demon's help.

And if that wasn't bad enough, a second paladin had fallen in with a demon just three months after that. Luke Morgan had been one of their best soldiers, and he also chose a demon over the guild. But then, according to the rumors he'd heard, they hadn't given Luke much choice. Attempted murder tended to turn people away from the cause.

But what really sent Sloan over the edge was losing the prophet, Ira Faer. Prophets were precious to the guild, because their visions guided the paladins on their missions. Without them, the guild wouldn't be able to operate. Sloan believed the demons were staging some sort of quiet coup, corrupting people away from the guild one by one. Nathan had trouble believing that was true, because he knew those men, and he didn't believe they would fall for something like that. He doubted he'd ever get a chance to listen to their side of the story, but he would be interested to hear it, if he could.

He didn't understand why Sloan and many other loyalists were personally offended by Alex, Luke, and Ira's departure from the guild. It wasn't against the rules to leave. No one had ever done it before, but that didn't make it wrong. The fact that they'd chosen to leave and be with demons was, ultimately, their own decision. They weren't hurting anyone, as far as he knew, and if they were guilty of some grievous sin, they would answer for that in the afterlife. It wasn't up to Nathan or Sloan or anyone else in the guild to cast judgment.

But Sloan didn't see it that way. And in an attempt to prevent anyone else from 'falling prey' to the demons, as Sloan called it, he'd issued a curfew for those living on the grounds of HQ and required daily check-ins every morning for those who did not. Paladins were required to show up and check in with their captains, and captains had to meet with Sloan himself. It was exhausting.

Nathan took his time driving to HQ. The rain came down in blinding sheets against the windshield. This kind of rain was unusual at this time of year. Maybe it was God's way of helping him stall his meeting. It gave him an excuse to be late, but all too soon he found himself rolling past the iron gate and into the compound.

It looked more like a college campus than a guild of elite demon hunters. The administrative building, recreational center, schoolhouse, orphanage, and apartment complex were all made of matching red brick, while the white church stood out like a beacon. There was a carefully landscaped circular drive in front of the admin building. Nathan followed it sedately, turning into one of the parking lots off the circle and swooping into a parking spot.

With a sigh, he gathered his things, held his jacket over his head, and ran from the wet parking lot toward the stately building. When he barreled into the tasteful foyer, he nearly slipped on the polished wood floor.

"Easy, Nate," Julian called, holding his styrofoam cup from the cafeteria up and away from Nathan's damp flailing. He was standing with brothers Daniel and Nicolas Garcia, the latter of which was one of the captains who would also be in the meeting with Sloan. Daniel, the younger brother, was the same age as Julian, and both were in Nicolas's squad. Nathan had spent more time around Nicolas, who was the same rank and closer to his age, but he'd heard good things about the younger two. The three of them were thick as thieves, Julian's pale blond hair standing out starkly against the Garcia brothers' short, dark curls.

"Sorry, sorry," Nathan gasped, shaking the rain from his jacket and closing the door behind him. "It's raining."

Daniel looked like he was fighting a smile, his golden brown eyes sparkling with mirth. "You don't say."

Nicolas cast him an amused grin.

“Nic says there’s a captain meeting,” Julian said, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one was near.

Nathan nodded, looking at Nicolas. “Yes, there is. Do you have any idea what it’s about?”

Nicolas shrugged. His short curls were highlighted with honey-gold beneath the warm glow of the chandelier above them, his deep brown eyes cool. “I have my theories.”

Nathan hummed. “As do I.” And none of them spelled anything good for the guild. He wanted to oppose any more violence against the defectors and the halflings. They weren’t hurting anyone, and whipping themselves up into a frenzy about the choices they’d made did nothing but hurt the guild’s true cause.

Sloan had been on the warpath since Ira escaped the guild’s prison. They’d been holding him while they debated how to keep him from leaving—and taking his visions with him. Nathan had his suspicions about how he managed it, but there were no witnesses, and no one came forward after the fact. He suspected someone from their little pocket of dissenters helped him, but it was better for all of them if they didn’t come forward. Plausible deniability could go far.

Julian bobbed his head, sipping something that could be coffee or hot cocoa, based on the color. He looked back and forth between them.

“The curfews and check-ins aren’t a great look,” Julian said.

“Nor is the fact that some of our people tried to kill one of them,” Daniel said.

Nicolas looked around sharply, but luckily, they were alone. Arguments in favor of the defectors didn't go well these days. Nathan had seen more than one person laid out on the training yard for sharing an opposing viewpoint.

"Don't discuss it here," Nicolas warned, then shot Nathan a pointed look. "And it's probably not a good idea to have any more of those meetings of yours."

They hadn't had a meeting in a while. He and a handful of like-minded paladins had met up after Commander Sloan and the council changed the halflings' threat level to a Category A, which meant they could be killed on-sight. It hadn't set right with many of them, and they'd congregated in the library to exchange numbers and discuss what to do. Ultimately, they'd decided on nothing. Nathan wasn't sure that had been the right call. Now, it felt too dangerous to speak up. Dissent wasn't welcome, but staying silent wasn't the answer, either. Something would have to give eventually.

Nicolas hadn't been in that meeting, but his little brother Daniel had. Nathan wasn't surprised Daniel had filled him in, and he didn't mind. Nicolas was trustworthy.

"I'm not sure that's the answer," he finally said.

Nicolas's jaw tightened. "It's getting dangerous. I don't want to see Danny or anyone else get hurt."

"Neither do I," Nathan agreed. "But staying complacent is what's gotten us into this mess, I think. No one was willing to be the voice of reason."

"That voice of reason doesn't need to include my little brother, Nate," Nicolas said.

"Nic, I chose to go to that meeting. I know what I'm doing," Daniel said.

"You're my little brother and a member of my squad. It's my job to take care of you."

Daniel sighed, softening. “But I’m not a little kid anymore.”

An uncertain frown lined Nicolas’s face. “I know that.”

Julian leaned in, breaking the tension. “You guys should probably get a move on if you don’t want to be late for the meeting, right?”

Nathan straightened. “Right, we should. Lead the way, Nic. Julian, Daniel, it was good to see you both.”

“You too, Captain Accardi,” Daniel replied, stepping aside so they could go up the stairs.

Julian waved them away with a hum of agreement, and Nathan fell into step with Nicolas.

“I’m sorry you feel I’ve endangered Daniel—or anyone else, for that matter,” Nathan offered quietly.

Nicolas’s mouth twisted. “He’s right. He’s not a kid anymore. Doesn’t mean I won’t always worry.”

“Of course. He’s family. As far as I know, that meeting is still a well-kept secret. I’m not surprised Daniel told you about it, but it seems everyone else has been keeping it quiet.”

“That’s good,” Nicolas said. “Maybe you’re right that someone should’ve spoken up sooner. But they didn’t, and now we’re headed down an uncertain path.”

Nathan steeled his spine as they approached the conference room. Nicolas was worried that whoever spoke up would be punished, and it was understandable he

wanted to protect his brother. Nathan didn't have any family of his own to worry about. If anyone should speak up about the insidious tension going on in the guild, shouldn't it be someone like him? He'd called that first meeting. It was his responsibility to stand up for the people who felt the same way as he did.

There were many conference rooms and offices and meeting spaces in the administrative building, so they found their way to the one on the agenda for today, a conference room with a long table in the center. A darkened projector hung overhead, and a white board gleamed on the far wall. Rain trickled down the windows. Several other captains were already waiting in the rolling leather chairs around the table. Nathan knew all of them at least by sight, but he only knew a handful by name.

"Morning, Nate, Nic," Mark said coolly. His buzzed hair was peppered with gray, and he bore deep scars on one forearm from a demon's claws.

Eyes followed Nathan as he sat down near the end of the table. Nicolas sat between him and the others, looking unbothered, but Nathan caught his pointed glance. He sensed the tension, too.

Nathan already didn't like the way this meeting was going, and Sloan wasn't even here yet. "How's it going?"

"Well enough. We were just discussing what the meeting is going to be about."

"I think we all know that already, don't we?" Nathan asked, glancing from face to face. This wasn't like the daily check-ins. Sloan wanted their input about the so-called traitors. Or at least, that was what Nathan assumed. He hoped there was no news about it, that they weren't planning to move against them. Nathan wouldn't be comfortable hunting humans, even ones Sloan and his loyalists wanted to condemn.

Mark shrugged lightly. "Probably. I was just curious where everyone stood on the

issue at hand. I don't think it's right that the traitors are still out there. They abandoned the cause, abandoned their duty, and they should be punished for it."

Nathan wished everyone would stop trying to draw lines in the sand. The only 'us' and 'them' they should be worried about were humans and monsters. The halflings were a gray area—but not the real enemies they should be concerning themselves with. Halflings were human souls that had gone to Hell and become demonic. They weren't like the monsters that the paladins hunted. They didn't kill people. Mostly, they just indulged in Earthly pleasures and enticed humans who wandered into their club, In Extremis, to do the same. Questionable, maybe, but they didn't exactly strike him as evil masterminds.

Samson, sitting beside Mark, was looking at the table, hiding his smirk behind a curled finger. The others all watched the exchange with interest, expressions varying between intrigue and boredom.

"I don't think it's our place to pass judgment on humans, even those who have made choices we don't agree with," Nathan said.

Mark hummed, as though Nathan had failed to pass some sort of test, and his murky brown eyes slid to Nicolas. "What about you, Captain Garcia?"

Nicolas passed an unreadable look toward Nathan and then met Mark's eyes. "I think it's probably best to wait for Commander Sloan, don't you?" he replied.

"Commander Sloan feels the same as we do," Samson said, sitting back in his chair. "Why else would we be here?"

"To discuss it," Nathan said firmly.

"And you'll tell him you think he's being too harsh on the demon-huggers, huh?"

Mark asked, mouth curling in disgust.

“I have total respect for Commander Sloan’s leadership,” Nathan said, and at one time that was true. He tried not to look too closely at the way his stomach turned as he said it now. “I believe he’s a good man, and a good man listens to his subordinates.”

“Plenty of his subordinates agree that something has to be done about the traitors.”

“They aren’t traitors,” Nathan said, struggling to keep his voice calm. “They never moved against the guild. They just left. In Luke Morgan’s case, he disappeared after an attempt was made on his life.”

“If you screw a demon, you deserve what you get,” Samson said, and the rest of the table chortled.

“Again,” Nathan’s voice shook with barely repressed fury, “it’s not our place to judge the choices they’ve made.”

Beside him, Nicolas buried his fingers in his curls and stared at the table.

“If not us, then who?” Samson said.

Nathan opened his mouth to snap, fingers clenching into a fist on the table. But before he could speak, the door opened.

Sloan breezed into the room. “That’s enough, captains. Save your frustrations for the training yard, or better yet, for the demons.”

Mark cast Nathan a smug smirk as Sloan took a seat at the head of the table.

“We’re here today for a couple of reasons. First, I’d like your opinions on our next move regarding the halflings,” Sloan said. “The council and I have been in disagreement for a while now, and I think getting some perspective from the field agents themselves might help us come to an agreement. I’ll be meeting with all the other squad captains throughout the day as they come in, but I thought meeting in smaller groups like this would give you all a chance to speak your mind.”

He wanted hungry field agents vying for permission to go after the halflings, Nathan realized. He thought having the captains’ backing would help sway the council’s decision. It wasn’t a surprise, really, but he was disappointed that Sloan was continuing to target the wrong people.

“The halflings are demons,” Mark said, raising his palms up as though it was obvious. “We hunt demons. I confess, I don’t even understand why the council is having a hard time with this.”

“The halflings don’t kill humans,” Nathan said. “I think it would be a waste of our energy and resources to target them when there are actual monsters out there killing people.”

“Oh, whatever,” Mark said disdainfully. “A monster that doesn’t kill is still a monster. It doesn’t stop being a monster just because it knows how to play nice. Haven’t we always dreamed of a time when no demons walked the Earth? That includes halflings.”

Sloan nodded seriously, gesturing to Mark, who sat back with a smug look.

Nathan shook his head, struggling to stay logical. “We’ve also been known to seek out halflings at In Extremis on rare occasions when we need information about coming threats or local incidents. Targeting them would make it harder to seek out information in times of dire need.”

“You think we couldn’t interrogate a halfling in the future and still get what we want from them?” Mark scoffed. “We know exactly how to hurt them.”

“You’re suggesting we kill indiscriminately and torture any future halflings for information?” Nathan asked.

“They’re monsters,” Samson said coldly. “It’s not like they even feel pain the way humans do.”

“You don’t know that,” Nathan said.

“They’re monsters ,” Samson said again. “Who even cares what they feel?”

“I can think of a few,” Nicolas muttered.

“Traitors, you mean?” Mark said. “Let’s not talk about the ghoulish people who abandoned the cause to... be with those things.”

“They’re still human beings,” Nathan added. “Just because they made choices you don’t agree with doesn’t mean they deserve to die.” He could only say it in so many ways before he started wanting to pull his hair out in frustration.

Sloan held up a hand for silence, but Mark missed it, barreling on.

“They’re welcome to make whatever choices they want, that’s true, but the moment they chose demons they became no better than the monsters themselves!”

“Quiet, quiet!” Sloan called, and Mark sat back.

Nathan blew out a breath. This was going about as well as he expected.

“We obviously all have some very strong opinions about this,” Sloan said, eyes glittering as he looked at Mark and Samson. “This is why I wanted your input. If you’re going to be our front line in this fight, I want to know where you stand.”

Nathan rubbed a hand over his face, leaning forward to brace his elbows on the table. “With all due respect, commander, I think our time and resources would be better spent focusing on the demons who are actively harming innocent people. Yes, halflings are demons.” He gestured to Mark. “But halflings don’t kill people. And because they don’t kill people, I think it’s safe to say focusing on them would cause more innocents to be hurt in the long run, because we aren’t doing what we can to protect them. We’re letting our personal feelings about what happened with Hawk and Morgan and Faer get in the way of our duty.”

“I agree,” Nicolas said softly.

Nathan inclined his head in gratitude. Now was his chance to push for more. He could ask Sloan to grant the traitors mercy. With a fortifying breath, he forged on. “I would even take things a step further, if you’d allow it.”

“How so?” Sloan asked. It was begrudging—but he was still listening. That had to mean something.

“The—traitors,” he didn’t like the word, but that was what most people called them, “are still fighting demons. They still patrol just as they did when they worked here. If they’re still protecting people, regardless of the other choices they’ve made, we might even be able to make allies of them. At the very least, we could maintain a ceasefire. A truce, if you will. We won’t attack them if they keep their demons in line, and maybe we wind up with a few extra people out there fighting the good fight, keeping an eye out when we can’t.”

“What do you mean, ‘when we can’t?’” Joseph asked, his face a mask of distaste.

Nathan gestured to the room around them. “We are very good at what we do, but we’re still sheltered behind our walls most of the time. The traitors, they don’t have that luxury. They’re out there in the thick of it at all times. If we had a truce with them, they could bring cases to us that they can’t handle on their own. They could be eyes and ears that we wouldn’t otherwise have out there. With their connections to the demons, they might hear about rising threats before they’ve had a chance to gain strength. Maybe we could use this as a way to do more good instead of letting them become our enemies.”

Sloan rubbed his jaw. There was no warmth in his calculating gaze, and Nathan wondered if he’d pushed too far. Mark was shaking his head in disbelief. Nicolas watched warily, his face half-hidden behind his styrofoam cup of coffee.

And then Sloan relaxed back in his chair, threading his fingers together over his stomach. “You know what, Captain Accardi? If this is something you feel so strongly about, I’ll let you pursue it.”

A jolt went through Nathan. Really? He hadn’t expected that at all.

“What?” Mark exclaimed. “You can’t be serious.”

Sloan waved him down. “Contact the traitors and see if they’ll be willing to meet. We’ll see how receptive they are to the idea. You’ll run point and speak on behalf of the guild with them.”

Samson’s face twisted in shock. “You’re really allowing this?”

Sloan raised a finger. “That brings me to my next point of order, actually. I’m allowing this for a reason.” He opened up the laptop in front of him, then stood to fetch the remote that controlled the projector. A moment later, his screen appeared on the wall to Nathan’s right. “There’s a new case that’s cropped up. One of my contacts

in the police brought it to my attention. I had an email from them this morning.”

A curl of unease went through Nathan as Sloan clacked away on his keyboard for a moment, pulling up a video of what looked like CCTV footage of a street view. Sloan knew a handful of police officers who were aware of the supernatural and the guild’s real work fighting demons. It was rare that their paths crossed, though.

“You haven’t had a big breakfast this morning, have you?”

The captains all shook their heads.

“Good.”

Sloan pressed play. On the screen, people were milling up and down the sidewalk. The sun was shining. The date in the corner was from two days ago.

“Watch that young man with the red backpack,” Sloan said as a young male, probably college-aged, appeared on the screen, looking down at his cell phone. Was this near the college campus? When he neared the middle of the screen, he stopped. His shoulders hunched, and a moment later his phone tipped out of his grasp. Trembling violently, he fell to his knees, clawing at his chest. People on the sidewalk stopped, giving him a wide berth as he screamed. The silent video somehow made it even worse. Dark blood bloomed on the front of his shirt, and he fell onto his back, his body arching unnaturally.

“My God,” Nathan breathed.

His chest burst outward, like something out of a horror movie, ripping his shirt and spewing blood and viscera around him.

Nathan covered his mouth, and the video went dark. Nicolas turned away, his face

pale.

“What...” Joseph stopped, shaking his head helplessly.

Sloan sighed. “That was twenty-year-old David Simms, a student at the local college. Local media has been blessedly quiet about it, because despite the weirdness and the goriness, there’s no evidence of foul play. The official word from the coroner is a... freak heart thing of some kind. It looks like his heart exploded—to them.”

“What does it look like to us?” Mark asked.

Nathan wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“One of the eyewitnesses—who will likely be paying for a lifetime of therapy—swears she saw a hand burst through the victim’s chest. From the inside.”

“A ha...” Nathan’s voice gave out.

Sloan nodded sagely. “My thoughts exactly. It looks demonic to me, but it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I’m informing all the squad captains so you can keep an eye out for anything similar.” His gaze settled on Nathan’s. “And unfortunately, you’re right. There’s a chance the traitors might know something about this that we don’t. Our prophets so far have seen nothing related to this incident or any like it. Personally, I don’t think reaching out to them will go well. I don’t think they’ll be any more receptive to the idea of a truce than we are, but if this is something Captain Accardi wants to do, I’m happy to let him pursue it for now. Maybe it’ll at least give us a lead about what happened to this young man. And if not, maybe we’ll learn a little more about what the traitors are up to.” He looked at Mark and tapped his temple. “Know your enemy.”

Mark settled back in his chair with a satisfied look, and Nathan schooled his

expression.

It wasn't what he wanted to hear, but at least Sloan was giving him a chance. If he could prove that a truce could be useful, maybe Sloan would let this vendetta go. Nathan would take any chance he had.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 2

Storm

Stray droplets of rain landed on Storm's shoulders as he strode across the craggy parking lot toward the Rink. It didn't look like much from the outside, with its rusted metal walls, but the humans had really turned the inside around. It still looked like a skating rink, but it was a useable space, at least. Padded training mats covered the old skating floor, with wooden dummies and target boards for practicing. The disco ball, colored lights, and mirrored wall were kind of a hilarious juxtaposition, but somehow it worked.

The others' cars were already there, and his enhanced hearing made it possible to hear the raised voices from within. He blew out a gusty sigh. What the fuck were they arguing about? The meeting hadn't even started yet.

He'd woken up at sunset to a text message from Wolf.

Meeting at Rink. Something's come up.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

Things had been quiet since Ira's escape from the guild. They didn't know about the Rink—yet, at least—which meant it was something of a safe haven from both the paladins and the demons alike. Lilith, the halfling owner of In Extremis, had been pissed at them ever since the paladins attacked the club in search of Ira. Storm used to be the bouncer there, but he hadn't worked there since they'd set the place on fire.

And while Lilith hadn't been happy about his retirement, she'd let him go with surprisingly little fuss. He'd always known his position was easily replaceable, and it probably didn't come as a big surprise that he wanted to leave after he'd been stabbed by a paladin's holy blade. It was mostly healed now, but it still ached sometimes in a way that made him feel very mortal. He liked being a bouncer well enough, but he didn't want to die for it. So he threw his lot in with these misfits.

Ira had been with them for about eight weeks. It wasn't long in the grand scheme of things. He supposed it was just a matter of time until something happened. Trouble followed this group like flies on shit.

The gang was all there, standing around the old air hockey table they used for a conference table now. Angela and Zachary, teens who'd basically come with the purchase of the Rink, were sitting on the half-wall that separated the old arcade area from the training floor and watching the argument like the peanut gallery at a tennis match, their eyes bouncing back and forth. They spent a lot of time there, because their dad was a drunk who never had time for them.

Shadrach and Xyra were leaning against the glass snack bar with beers in hand. They, like Storm, were more removed from this group than the others. Xyra had left In Extremis after the fire at the same time as Storm. Shadrach, a leviathan, was mostly there for entertainment, as far as Storm could tell. By the table, the humans, Alex, Luke, and Ira, were on one side of the table and arguing with their demonic lovers. Talon, Malachi, and Wolf were on the other side of the table, although Wolf was edging around it like he was ready to surrender.

"What's happening?" Storm asked Xyra.

She flicked a lock of long, midnight blue hair over her shoulder. "Ira got a phone call. Somebody from the guild wants to call a truce. The demons think it's a trap. The humans think it's worth a shot. Nobody is seeing eye to eye."

“It’s too dangerous ,” Talon said in a way that suggested he’d said it many times already.

“We can handle dangerous,” Alex said—in the same way.

“ You are absolutely not running point on this,” Talon said. Storm had never seen him so protective of anyone the way he was protective of Alex. It was like meeting Alex, back when Alex was still a paladin, had completely rewired Talon’s leviathan brain.

“Neither are you,” Malachi said to Luke, gentler but no less stubborn.

Luke sighed, rubbing a hand over his scarred jaw. “It’s Nathan, Mal. He’s not like the others. He wouldn’t be leading us into a trap.”

“Wouldn’t I have said something if I thought this was a trap?” Ira added, meeting Wolf at the edge of the table and letting the beefy halfling fold him into his arms.

“You don’t always see everything ,” Talon pointed out.

“That’s a good point,” Wolf said, half-muffled by Ira’s hair. He’d once been the bartender of In Extremis. Now he spent his days with a prophet of the Lord. Life was weird as fuck.

“Hey!” Ira protested, slapping Wolf’s forearm around his middle. “Whose side are you on?”

“Whatever side keeps you safe,” Wolf replied matter-of-factly.

On Xyra’s other side, Shadrach rolled his eyes so hard his head moved.

“Why are you here?” Storm asked him. “I didn’t think you cared about any of this.”

Shadrach shrugged one shoulder. “Boredom, curiosity. The most lethal of combinations.”

“Mm,” Storm agreed. “Tell me about it.” If there was one thing he’d learned about eternity, it’s that it was boring .

“We can’t just turn him down,” Luke said. “If he’s reaching out, this could be good for us. With Lilith still pissed at us, this might be our chance to finally take some of the heat off ourselves.”

“Treasure, you can’t ask me to let you walk into a potential trap,” Malachi said. His long black hair was shaved over one ear, and with black skinny jeans and a black band T-shirt, he looked more like a rockstar than a demon. Only his red irises gave away the truth. Silver rings decorated the fingers that lifted imploringly at Luke. Storm couldn’t believe he’d gone from partying at In Extremis to calling someone ‘treasure.’

“Then come with me,” Luke replied.

“No,” Talon said sternly. “None of the humans are doing this.”

“It’s not any safer for you guys!” Alex exploded. “They all have holy weapons. You can’t heal quickly from a holy injury, remember? We actually have a better chance of surviving being stabbed by one of those swords than you do. With your blood in us, we’ll still heal fast.”

“You don’t really think telling me you might be stabbed is how to talk me into this, do you?” Talon asked. “Besides, in order to stab one of us, they’d have to actually beat us in a fight. We can take care of ourselves.”

“Are you implying that we can’t ?” Alex rejoined.

Storm tuned them out. It was interesting that the guild was reaching out now to call a truce. Their little group was still tiny. The guild had them far outnumbered and outgunned. What changed? Why did their bloodthirsty commander suddenly change his mind about how to deal with them? Either it was a trap, like Talon suspected, or... the paladins had a change of heart? Storm had to admit, a trap was the more likely answer. If it wasn’t a trap, they were at least hiding something. Weren’t any of them curious about what that could be?

They weren’t going to come to an agreement any time soon, it seemed, so he stepped forward to throw a wrench in all their plans and said, “I’ll do it.”

Both sides of the table stopped and turned toward him.

“What?” Talon asked.

“You don’t want any of the humans to do it, because it’s probably a trap. But the humans won’t leave it alone, because it might not be a trap. So I’ll do it. Give me the human’s phone number, and I’ll run point. We’ll find out what kind of man he is when he’s stuck working with a demon rather than one of the humans like he expects.” And he knew they’d all go for it. The demons would just be glad their humans weren’t in the guild’s sights. The humans would allow it because they wanted to know what this Nathan had to say. Storm was the most obvious one for the job. He didn’t have a human to fret over him, and he wasn’t stupid enough to fall for a trap by trusting too easily.

Talon smirked.

Ira nodded slowly, studying him in a way that left him feeling exposed. “Yes. I think that’s the right course of action.”

And that pretty much decided it. If the prophet decided it was the right thing to do, the others were easily convinced. Ira gave him the paladin's contact information—Nathan Accardi. Apparently he was Alex's old squad captain.

"Anything I should know about this guy before I introduce myself?" he asked as he plugged the paladin's name and number into his phone.

Alex and Luke both opened their mouths, but Talon cut them off. "Yeah. These guys like him and will tell you he's different, but he obviously doesn't disagree enough to actually walk away from what they're doing. So watch your back."

"And my front," Storm promised.

Alex shot Talon a halfhearted glare. "Nate's really not a bad guy. Yeah, he's a paladin. Yeah, he's still standing with the guild in spite of the things they've done. But he's not the type to attack without cause."

"If he says the meeting is legit, it's legit," Luke added. "He was always one of the good ones."

Storm studied their earnest faces and Talon's exasperated one for a moment. "Didn't you used to think Sloan was one of the good ones, too?"

Alex and Luke looked at each other and grimaced.

Storm nodded. "Thought so. I'll reserve judgment about this guy, but he's looking unfavorable right now. I'm gonna grab a drink, and then I'll shoot him a text."

"Try to be nice?" Alex asked. "It's okay to be wary, but don't be unnecessarily aggressive. We don't want to spoil this if it could turn out to be something good."

“I’m never unnecessarily aggressive,” Storm deadpanned.

Talon’s mouth twitched. “Didn’t I once see you throw a guy to the dance floor and shove a bottleneck down his throat?”

Alex looked aggrieved.

Storm bit back a smile. “Yep. That was necessary.”

Talon cackled.

* * *

While the others branched off to start training, Storm wandered over to the secondhand sofa they bought for the meeting area and sat down, his phone in one hand and a beer in the other. While the humans swung their swords and their demon lovers ogled them, Storm sat in the back of the room, making first contact with the new potential trouble in their lives.

Ira gave me your phone number. I will be your point of contact. You can call me Storm.

There. Nice and forthright. It got his point across. He wasn’t doing this to make friends, so he didn’t really care if he seemed abrasive.

Storm. Hi. I’m Nathan. I’m familiar with the others, but not you. Are you a halfling?

The moment of truth. Would Nathan accept him or balk?

I am. They’re all understandably wary of dealing with a paladin, so I volunteered.

That was kind of you. I mean you no harm. All of you.

Well, damn. He'd expected at least a little resistance. Maybe this guy wasn't as bad as Talon wanted to believe. Of course, maybe Nathan was lying. It would be easy to seem accepting over text. That didn't make him trustworthy.

As much as they'd like to believe that, I'll be a little harder to convince.

Then it's good they chose you. There are still plenty of paladins who would like to target you guys. I'm trying to show them there's a better way.

It was easy to say pretty words when they weren't face-to-face. Storm felt he could get a better read on him in-person. He knew a liar when he saw one. Even the best ones had tells.

Why don't we meet?

The three little dots bounced for a moment, and then stopped. They appeared again—and disappeared.

“Geez, just spit it out.”

Yes, that would be fine. Tomorrow at noon? I'm on patrol rn.

Ah, Storm was surprised he was texting him back at all, then. Weren't patrols supposed to be dangerous?

Yeah, just let me know where, and I'll meet you.

Noon wasn't his favorite time of day, and he suspected the human had chosen it on purpose to have him wrong-footed during the meeting. That was fine. Two could play

that game.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 3

Nathan

Perhaps it was mean to choose noon for a meeting, Nathan considered as he strode into the coffee shop and ordered a black coffee. But nobody said he had to be particularly accommodating. He didn't know this halfling. This wasn't even one of the halflings that the defectors were involved with, as far as he knew. He'd hoped his point of contact would be Ira. They'd parted on good terms when Ira left the guild. He'd even contacted Nathan to tell him that he'd left, and he was the one Nathan had called about the proposal for the truce. So it was a surprise to get a text from a halfling who said Nathan would have to go through him from now on. Maybe he should be as wary of the halfling as the halfling was of him.

Actually, he wasn't sure that was fair. He had the whole Paladin Guild at his back. What did the defectors and their demons have? A club full of deviants and each other, he supposed. At least they hadn't actively tried to kill anyone. Nathan couldn't say the same for the guild. Strange that he was the less trustworthy one in this scenario, and the demon had the moral high ground.

With his coffee in hand, he claimed a sun-warmed booth by the window, facing the door. He took a sip of his coffee and grimaced. Too bitter, but he didn't want to spend money on frivolous things when he should be focusing on the meeting he was about to take part in.

At exactly ten minutes after twelve, the door swung open and admitted the tallest, broadest, most muscled man Nathan had ever seen. Wearing a leather jacket and

gleaming silver aviators, his hair was pale as snow. He strode to the counter and gruffly ordered a drink in a quiet, deep tone. The barista eyed him none too subtly, and Nathan couldn't help doing the same. His jeans hugged his thick thighs and ass.

Nathan had never considered himself gay—or even bisexual. He'd only ever dated women, and what few relationships he'd tried to have had been like a firework, hot and exciting at first but always ending in disappointment. But he couldn't deny that he was attracted. He was very, very attracted. So attracted, in fact, that he turned away, rubbing the back of his neck and staring out the window at nothing so he wouldn't be caught staring at the pale-haired statue of perfection standing by the counter.

He was here for business. That man would probably punch him in the face if he caught him staring, anyway.

A figure swooped into the booth across from him. He turned his head—and his words died in his throat. It was him, the pale-haired man. He tugged his aviators down his nose just slightly, allowing Nathan to see crimson irises.

Oh, God, he's a demon.

Embarrassment crawled up his neck, and he ducked his head. He could not be attracted to this demon. Absolutely not.

“Storm, I take it?”

“Mm-hm. And you're Nathan Accardi.” He lifted something with whipped cream and caramel to his mouth and sucked on a green straw. Nathan tried very hard not to stare at the way his lips wrapped around it.

“H-How did you know?” he asked, taking a sip of his bitter brew and biting back a

grimace.

Storm leaned in, his eyes obscured by his sunglasses. His hand slid across the formica table and tapped Nathan's guild ring. Nathan's mouth went dry when that warm finger brushed his scarred knuckle. He was thirty-three years old. He couldn't swoon like this.

Storm's heather gray shirt pulled tight across his chest as he sat back and draped one arm across the back of the booth. A shoe knocked against Nathan's, and he tried not to outwardly react.

"So," Storm said, "is this legit?"

"What?" Nathan asked, not following.

"This." Storm gestured between the two of them. "The truce. Is it legit? Are your people really ready to play nice with us?"

"Ye—" He stopped, recalling Sloan's guarded expression, Mark's shaking head. It took him a moment to find the right words, finally settling on what he felt was most honest. "I want it to be. It was my idea. Sloan approved it for his own agenda, I'm sure, but I hope it's the beginning of something different. I don't want there to be sides."

Storm leaned in. "What's Sloan's agenda?"

Nathan blew out a breath. "If he has one, he hasn't told me about it. I think he wants to use this as an opportunity to get information about you guys, or maybe he just wants the truce to fail so he can say we tried and shut me up once and for all. But I'm hoping I can use it as an opportunity to show him and everyone else that we can all work together."

One corner of Storm's mouth quirked. "That's very optimistic of you."

Nathan hid behind his cup. "I don't feel very optimistic these days, but thank you. I think."

Storm's easy, lopsided smile didn't waver, and Nathan felt like a bug under a magnifying glass.

There was another reason Sloan had approved this meeting, so Nathan focused his attention on the next piece of business rather than the way that smile made him feel. He swallowed hard, remembering blood and viscera on pavement. He wouldn't be forgetting that awful footage any time soon. "There's something else."

Storm's head tilted, bathing his pale hair in golden sunlight.

"There's been a murder. I floated the idea of the defectors having connections to the demonic world that we don't have, and that's another reason Sloan gave me the green light to contact you all for a truce, hoping you might know something about it."

"What kind of murder?" Storm asked.

Nathan couldn't hide his discomfiture. "It's unlike anything we've ever seen before. A young man was killed. We don't know how exactly. Sloan was given the CCTV footage by a police friend who recognized it as an unusual death."

"And you watched this footage?"

Nathan nodded, staring into the middle distance. "His chest exploded. An eyewitness claims she saw what looked like a hand emerging from his chest cavity just before he died."

“A hand ?” Storm repeated, looking scandalized.

Nathan nodded again, pushing his coffee away. The acidic taste would do nothing for his nausea.

Storm stroked his sharply cut jaw. “Hm. I’ll talk to the others. Any chance you could get us access to that footage? It might help if we could see it for ourselves. Some of the demons are older than others. Talon or Shadrach would probably be your best option for a lead. They’ve been around for a long time.”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to Sloan. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind sending me a copy of it, if it would help.”

Storm tipped his head back and to one side. Nathan got the impression he was being studied. “Good. Now, tell me why you cared enough to suggest a truce between us to Sloan. Why do you care if there are sides?”

Nathan blinked. “Alex was a member of my squad. Luke Morgan sacrificed so much for the cause. Ira Faer was always kind and friendly, if a little quiet. They’re all good men. Whatever circumstances led them to leaving the guild, they don’t deserve to be killed for it. It’s enough that Alex and Luke were banished. But targeting them when they’ve done nothing wrong? It’s not like they’re plotting to attack the guild. There’s no law that says we can’t quit or retire, even if it’s never really been done before. They should be left alone. Whatever choices they make once they’re gone are their business. They’re not hindering the guild’s activity, so it shouldn’t matter.”

“What do you think about the choices they’ve made?” Storm asked.

Nathan faltered. “What I think doesn’t matter.”

“It does to me. I want to hear what you think.”

It took him a moment to find his voice. “Why?”

Storm shrugged one large shoulder. “I’m sizing you up. That’s why Talon sent me.”

Nathan flushed. Right. He was only here because he had to be. He didn’t really care what Nathan thought—not on a personal level, anyway. “Okay. Well, I...” He paused, taking another sip of his cooling coffee to gather his thoughts. “I can’t say I understand why they made the choices they did, but like I said, there’s no law against leaving the guild. As long as they don’t try to harm us, I see no reason to cast any judgment on what they’ve done. If they’ve sinned in some way, that’s between them and God, not them and me.”

Storm leaned forward, putting his chin in his hands and his elbows on the table, looking gleeful. “Do you think it’s a sin to be with a demon, holy man?”

Nathan opened his mouth, but nothing came out. “Um.”

Eloquent. He’d never been so caught off-guard by anyone before.

Did he think it was a sin to be with a demon? He’d never really thought about it before. He didn’t think sitting here talking to one was a sin. Was it really so bad to find happiness with one? As long as they weren’t hurting anyone, he hoped it didn’t matter. The important thing, always, was that no one was being hurt. He’d always thought true sin was that which maliciously hurt another living thing.

His face flushed at the thought of admitting that, though. It felt a little too much like setting himself apart from the guild, and that wasn’t what he was meant to do here. He was meant to be an ambassador for the guild.

“I really couldn’t say,” he finally said, deciding it was a safe non-answer. “And it’s not up to me.”

Storm hummed, as though he found that curious.

Before he could decide what to say next, Storm spoke again. “Talon had a good point last night.”

“Oh?” Talon was the demon Alex had faced banishment for. Against his better judgment, Nathan was curious to hear more about the demon who’d gained the young man’s trust.

“Yeah. If you really disagree with some of the things your guild has been doing, why do you stay? Does the good really outweigh the bad at this point? They tried to murder Luke. Hell, if you count the attack on In Extremis, they’ve tried to kill Luke twice and Alex once. They kidnapped Ira and held him captive in a goddamn dungeon.”

He spoke with such protective anger. It just further proved what Nathan already suspected. Halflings were much more similar to humans than the guild wanted to believe. It sounded like Storm genuinely cared about Alex, Luke, and Ira. His gut twisted with some indescribable emotion. Definitely not jealousy. That would be madness.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Storm asked, pulling Nathan from his thoughts.

He smiled, shaking his head. “I’m just really glad they have people like you in their corner. I’m glad they aren’t alone.”

Storm hesitantly accepted that answer. “So?”

“Right, your question. I suppose I stay because I believe we’re doing more good than bad. There are no other groups like the guild who fight demons in such an organized

fashion. And if I want to make a lasting change, I think it's better to do that from within. Sure, I could leave and become a rogue hunter like Alex and Luke have, but the guild needs people like me who disagree with their more radical actions. They need a voice of reason to keep things from going to extremes. If everyone who disagrees just leaves, only the extremists remain."

"There have been many cases in history where the extremists turned on the naysayers within their own organization," Storm said, looking thoughtful. "How do you know that won't happen with your guild?"

Nathan shook his head. "I don't. But I have to believe. That's the whole point, isn't it? Faith?"

Storm snorted. "You'd know better than me, holy man."

Nathan leaned forward. "Alex and Luke, are they doing okay? I know they were there for the fight at the club. Did they make it out all right?"

Something in Storm's expression shuttered. "They made it out fine."

Nathan got the impression he was missing something. He sat back, frowning. "Good. That's good." He wanted to say more, but he wasn't sure what he'd said wrong.

Storm relaxed, and it looked like it took conscious effort. "And yeah, they're doing good. They're working as private investigators during the day, and they've had a pretty steady stream of clients lately. Most of them are people who have no idea about the supernatural, but they seem fine with that. It pays the bills. And their base is... something." He snorted, and Nathan found himself far more endeared by the dimple beside his mouth than he should be.

"Their base?"

“Yeah. It’s an old skating rink.”

Nathan blinked in surprise. “Really? How does that work?”

“Better than you’d think. They use the skating floor for training and sparring. The old arcade section is their meeting area. They’ve got snacks and drinks at the concession stand.” His white teeth gleamed in the sunshine as he smiled gleefully. “They even remodeled the bathroom so there are showers in there, and they’ve put cots in one of the back rooms if people need to rest or use first-aid.”

Nathan laughed brightly, sitting back and stretching. He curled a leg under him, and his other foot bumped Storm’s again, sending heat blooming under his skin. “That would be interesting to see. What made them decide to go with a skating rink?”

“A lack of funds, as I understand it,” Storm said bluntly. “They’ve refused to let Talon and the other demons help them pay for anything, so they had to take something cheap.”

“Ah. Well, good for them. I understand wanting a little independence.”

Storm cast him an arch look. “Do you?”

Nathan narrowed his eyes. “Just because I work for the guild doesn’t mean we all have some sort of hive mind.”

“That might be true for you, but I’m not so sure about the rest of your people.”

Nathan grimaced. It was hard to make a good case for himself after everything the guild had done lately. “That’s probably fair. But anyway, yes, I understand the value of independence. Now more than ever, perhaps.”

Storm smiled, inclining his head in approval. “Good to know.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 4

Storm

Nathan Accardi was radiant. Storm would've been embarrassed by the thought if anyone else could've heard it. He wasn't like the others, okay? He didn't have any interest in a human, but he could barely focus on the conversation, too busy drinking in Nathan's sun-tanned skin, his slate-gray eyes, the way his clever fingers fidgeted with the cardboard cup clutched between them. His oak-brown hair was cut in the usual high and tight military style that most of the paladins seemed to favor, and his handsome, angular face was cleanly shaven. He wanted to bite that sharp jaw with his teeth, force his head back to watch that nervous throat bob.

Nathan's rare smiles were like a dose of refreshing, cool darkness. Storm didn't care that the sun prickled his skin uncomfortably. He only lamented that he couldn't take his sunglasses off to see him properly. He'd planned to give the paladin an earful for choosing to meet at noon, but somehow his anger had dissolved when he actually sat down across from him.

When Nathan excused himself to the restroom as the meeting drew to a close, Storm waited a few moments and then followed him. The hallway beside the kitchen was mercifully windowless and dark. He stopped outside the men's room, listening to the sounds within. He didn't truly suspect Nathan of treachery after having spoken candidly with the man, but it was better to cover his bases. Blind trust was stupid, and Nathan was still working for the guild. He'd promised Talon that he wouldn't fall for any tricks.

But all he heard from within was the flushing of the toilet, followed by running water and then the rustle of paper towels.

The door opened, and Nathan stepped out before he saw Storm, nearly running right into him. A quiet sound of alarm left him as the door swung shut behind him.

Storm pushed his sunglasses up onto his head. For the first time, he got an unhindered look at the human. His high cheekbones, his bow-shaped lips. The honey-sweet scent of his skin mixed with the bitter coffee flavor he'd been drinking, and Storm found himself pressing closer, angling his head down to inhale more of it greedily. Nathan backed away, and Storm followed, penning him in against the door.

Nathan was tall. There weren't many who were close to Storm's height, but Nathan's eyes were level with his mouth. One broad hand pressed against Storm's chest, but it lacked strength. Nathan wasn't actually trying to push him away.

"What are you doing?" he breathed.

What was he doing? Just because the human was nice to look at and smelled divine didn't mean Storm could take what he wanted.

But he's mine , an insistent little voice said in the back of his head.

"Fuck," Storm murmured. This was so stupid. He'd watched the others fall for their humans. It wasn't supposed to happen to him .

Nathan's eyes widened slightly at the rough sound of his voice, but he didn't move. His throat bobbed, and Storm couldn't resist, trailing his fingers, feather-light, up and down the sun-tanned skin. Nathan's pulse fluttered wildly under his fingertips. He leaned in, his nose grazing Nathan's short hair.

The hand on his chest finally firmed, gently pushing him away. Nathan's eyes were wide, his cheeks rosy.

"You smell good," Storm said, cocking his head to one side.

Nathan's mouth opened, but nothing came out for a few moments. "I do?"

"Mm-hm." He laid his hand over the one on his chest, and Nathan's fingers tightened, pressing into the muscle of his pectoral as though with the urge to cling. The notion sent a fizz of delight through him. Did Nathan want him, too? "I'll tell the others that you mean well. Maybe you can come and see the Rink. I'm sure they'd like to speak with you, too."

"Great." Nathan's eyes, gray as a thundercloud, fell to their joined hands. "You've got my number."

Yes, he did, and he intended to use it. One meeting with him wasn't going to be anywhere near enough.

* * *

When he left the coffee shop, Storm couldn't bring himself to go back home. Instead, he drove straight to the one person he thought might have some answers.

'Yes, I think that's the right course of action,' their resident prophet had said. He didn't think to question it at the time, but now he had many questions. Many.

He shot Wolf a text to let him know he was coming over whether they liked it or not, and twenty minutes later he was pulling into the parking lot outside their building. He rode the elevator in pensive silence, and when he reached the door, it opened before he could knock.

Wolf's ash-blond hair was loose from its usual braid, tangled and wild, and there was a pillow crease on his face. "The fuck do you want, Storm?"

"I want to speak to your human. Go back to bed." He shooed Wolf out of the way and stepped past him.

Storm didn't know what he expected from an apartment shared by a demon and a prophet of the Lord, but somehow this seemed perfect. There was no television, but artwork hung on every wall. A pair of matching bookshelves framed the couch, filled to the brim with books. New paperbacks, old leather-bound books. Stacks of books sat in front of the bookshelves and in the corner. There were multicolored pillows on the couch and plants in the corners and hanging from baskets in front of the glass balcony doors.

Ira was on the couch with a book perched on his crossed legs, his curly hair in a loose bun atop his head. Wolf locked the door, muttered something, and disappeared back into the bedroom. The door closed with a resounding thud.

"You," Storm said, coming to a stop in front of Ira with the coffee table between them.

"Yes," Ira said, looking unsurprised to see him. He always seemed unsurprised. It was goddamn unnerving.

"Did you know?"

Ira shrugged.

"No, no. None of the cryptic bullshit. Did you know? "

Ira sighed, setting his book on the coffee table. "I suspected. I've seen the occasional

image of the two of you together?—”

“Like together together?”

He frowned, his nose scrunching. “Not, like, physically, if that’s what you mean. Standing together, shaking hands, that kind of thing. I’ve seen most of the—I mean. I’ve seen.” He stopped, his gaze going distant. He did that sometimes, when he was debating with himself how much he could say. Storm didn’t envy him. “I didn’t know for sure that it meant you two would wind up together, but at the very least, it indicated that you know each other and are at least friendly in the future.” His face broke out into a smile. “So you like him, then, huh?”

Storm threw his head back in despair. “ Fuck ,” he said, long and loud. “I don’t want this! No offense or anything, but you guild people just complicate things. There are enough of you running around already. I don’t want to get attached to him!”

Ira’s peaceful expression didn’t change. “Aren’t you already?”

“ Yes , goddammit.” He flopped down on the sofa beside Ira, making him bounce, and let out a frustrated growl. “He’s very pretty.”

Ira canted his head to one side. “Yeah, he’s all right, I guess.”

Storm scowled at him. “ You’re all right. He’s...” He didn’t know how to explain it. Something about Nathan just captivated him. He’d be damned if he put it into flowery words where someone could hear , though.

Ira snorted. “You want to call demonic dibs, don’t you?”

He sighed heavily. “I do. He probably wouldn’t appreciate that. He’s still very pro-guild, for the most part.”

“We all were at one time. It took Malachi a while to wear Luke down, for example. You’ll just have to be persistent—if you want him, that is.”

He did want him. Very much so. He wanted to peel his clothes off, lay him out, explore every crack and crevice his body had to offer. Pin him down and give him every body-shaking pleasure he could until he knew nothing but Storm.

“So I should annoy him until he gives in?” That sounded like Malachi’s strategy.

Ira laughed. “I don’t know that I’d put it that way. I’ll say this: you’re not the only one who feels that pull. I was drawn to Wolf, and Luke and Alex have both said they felt it for Malachi and Talon, too. So it might not be as hard as you think.”

Storm pursed his lips. “I don’t know anything about humans.”

The bedroom door opened, and Wolf strode back out. “I can’t go back to sleep, so I’ll help. Malachi didn’t annoy Luke into loving him. The thing he was persistent about was making Luke happy. In their case, Luke was very unhappy. So find out what Nathan wants and then give it to him so hard he never wants anyone else.”

Ira shook his head, an exasperated smile on his face. “That’s... yeah, that’s one way of putting it, I guess.”

Wolf pointed to the door. “It’s the middle of the day, and I can’t sleep with you two in here jabbering. Get out.”

Storm snickered. “Fine, fine. Who knew you were such a bastard without your beauty sleep?”

Wolf all but chased him out the door, but that was okay. He just had to find a strategy that worked for wooing Nathan, because he needed the man to be his. Whatever it

took.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 5

Nathan

“Hey, holy man.” The low rumble of Storm’s voice sent a shiver rolling down Nathan’s spine.

Hands slid up the back of his shirt, and weight rocked firmly against his front. Nathan moaned, tipping his head back and inviting Storm’s sinful mouth to latch onto his throat. Those big hands slipped down, guiding his legs up and apart to make room.

Their clothes were gone now, everything slick and hot between them. Nathan rutted up against Storm’s rock-solid body, their hard cocks pressed together and sending sparks of pleasure fizzing down his spine. Nathan moaned, helpless and wanton.

He didn’t have to do anything. Pleasure coursed through him, an ember coaxed into an inferno by the demon pinning him to the bed. Lips found his, and a slick tongue invaded his mouth. Storm would make him feel good. All he had to do was let go and trust.

Trust the demon. Give himself over. It seemed wrong, but nothing this good could be wrong.

“Let me take care of you, holy man,” Storm said. “I’ll take such good care of you.”

He threw his head back as the pleasure reached its crest, exploding out of him with a shout.

* * *

Nathan woke with sticky boxers and groaned up at the ceiling. He was far too old for this kind of behavior. He could admit, at least to himself, that maybe Storm had awakened something in him he hadn't known was there. Bisexuality was a thing, and just because he'd never considered it before didn't mean he couldn't be now . Certainly, he'd admired some of his fellow paladins out in the training yard and the weight room, but he'd thought everybody did that. He was reevaluating that now. He was reevaluating lots of things.

That it was a demon who awakened something like this in him was... unfortunate. But as long as it remained a naughty fantasy, everything would be okay. The best thing he could do was to put the dream from his mind and focus on more important things.

Throwing himself into the shower, he erased all the embarrassing evidence of his unfortunate night and stuffed the soiled boxers into the washing machine in the hall closet.

He checked his phone as he wandered to the kitchen, and his stomach flipped when he saw a text from Storm. Pale sunlight streamed through the small window over the sink. It seemed the rainstorm had passed. Maybe he could get some training in today. That should help take his mind off last night's dream.

It was good meeting you yesterday.

Awareness prickled down Nathan's spine. A simple text from a halfling shouldn't make him feel this way.

You too.

He busied himself with making some coffee and pouring it into a travel mug, determined to ignore his phone—until it chimed again. Against his will, his eyes slid to the screen.

Spoke to the others. You can come by the Rink tonight if you'd like.

Oh. That was quick. Nathan pondered how to answer as he went out to his car and started the engine.

Great, thanks. I'll let you know later today, if that's ok. Got to update Sloan, and I'll try to get a copy of that footage.

The dots bounced... and bounced... and bounced. What was he typing?

Be careful.

That was it. Warmth bloomed in Nathan's chest, and he tucked his phone into the space below the dash. He didn't even realize he was smiling, small and lopsided, until he saw himself in the rearview mirror.

Storm was worried about him. That was... nice.

* * *

Nathan didn't relish the administrative side of hunting demons, and giving this particular report was going to be even less fun than the ones for routine patrols. Sloan had given rather dubious permission for him to approach the defectors, and he feared that being too honest about how hopeful his meeting with Storm made him would drive Sloan in the opposite direction. He would have to maintain a delicate balance during this conversation in order to keep Sloan's favor.

He knocked on the office door, which stood ajar, and Sloan looked up from his computer. Indirect sunlight filtered in through the pair of windows behind him, highlighting the scattered gray strands in his dark hair.

“Captain Accardi, please come in. Have a seat.” He gestured to the chairs across the desk from him.

At one time, Nathan was quite comfortable in this office. For years, he’d never doubted that Sloan would have his back no matter what. Now, he sat stiffly and waited for instruction.

Sloan pushed his keyboard away and threaded his fingers together on his desk. “All right, tell me how the first contact with the traitors went.”

Nathan fought the urge to wince. He was still calling them ‘traitors.’ That didn’t bode well. He tried not to fidget. “It went well. I was put in contact with a halfling named?—”

Sloan’s lip curled. “A halfling ? Why not one of the traitors themselves? Were they too afraid to face you?” Something satisfied, even smug, crossed his face.

Nathan chose his words carefully. “I don’t know exactly, sir. I think they’re pretty wary at this point. I also think sending the halfling was also their way of checking the validity of my offer. If I wasn’t willing to work with him, they’d know I wasn’t serious about the truce.”

Sloan massaged the bridge of his nose. “Despicable. We don’t want a truce with the halflings. You can make your argument that they don’t kill people, and while that’s technically true, they are still demons. I don’t think associating with demons of any kind is wise. If you want to have a truce with the traitors, fine, but the halflings are a different matter entirely.”

Anxiety twisted like a coiled serpent within him. “All due respect, commander, but I think it would be wise to have a truce with both the humans and the halflings. At this point, they’re rather entwined, anyway. Moving against the halflings would incite the humans.”

Sloan hummed noncommittally. “Yes, well, I suppose we’ll see. You said you spoke to this halfling, then? How’d that go?” His lip curled distastefully, like the thought of being in a room with one was nauseating.

Nathan fought to keep his face impassive. “It went well enough. He agreed to meet in a public location of my choosing at noon. He said he wanted to make sure I was being truthful.”

Sloan barked out a laugh. “That’s rich coming from a demon.”

Nathan gritted his teeth together. “He said he’d talk to the humans about letting me meet with them next. I was hoping you could send me a copy of the footage. I’d like to let them see it so they can be on the lookout.” He didn’t mention the Rink or Storm’s text from this morning. He didn’t think it was wise to tell Sloan that he’d already been invited to see their base of operations. A part of him worried what Sloan would do with the knowledge of the base’s location.

“Yes, I can send that to your email. So you feel confident about how this is going?”

Nathan couldn’t read Sloan’s shuttered expression. “Yes, I do. The halfling was perfectly polite. I’m confident that if I play by their rules, they’ll become more trusting, and a lasting truce may truly be possible. Then we can all focus on the real mission—protecting people.”

Sloan’s pale blue eyes were like shards of ice. “Good. Show them the footage, gain their trust. See if they’ll invite you to their base. They have to be operating from

somewhere.”

“Their base? Why?”

Sloan’s cool gaze didn’t waver. “Because I’m ordering it, Captain Accardi.”

Nathan’s stomach lurched with anxiety. He lowered his eyes and nodded deferentially. “Yes, sir. Of course.”

“And keep me apprised of the situation, would you? I want to know what’s happening every step of the way.”

An alarm bell rang in the back of Nathan’s head. “Of course, Commander.”

“And let me know what they say about the footage. Which reminds me—I contacted the coroner. She’s one you’ve met before. I’d like you to go and take a look at the body. It’ll be at the morgue until the end of the week. That’s when they’ll cremate.”

Nathan winced. He’d like nothing less, but he understood Sloan’s reasons for asking. The coroner wasn’t trained to recognize demonic activity like the paladins were, which was likely why she reached out. He wondered if he might invite one of the defectors along, too, so they would be completely in the loop about the case.

“I’ll do that first thing tomorrow, Commander.”

Sloan nodded. “You’re dismissed, then. Go with God, Captain.”

“And you, as well.”

Nathan ducked out of the room as quickly as he’d come, breathing out a sigh of relief. Sloan obviously wasn’t thrilled that he was actually pursuing this truce, and Nathan

didn't like that he was pushing for the location of their base. The paladins had tried to kill them more than once. What reason did Sloan have for wanting to know where their base was? Was he planning something? The idea of Nathan being inadvertently complicit in whatever Sloan was planning made him feel physically sick. He wanted this truce to work. Maybe including them in the case would show Sloan how good things could be if they all worked together. Protecting the innocent was still the goal, wasn't it?

He tugged his phone from his jeans and opened up the chat with Storm.

Ok, I'd love to come by tonight. What's the address?

There wasn't an immediate response, so he pocketed his phone and headed toward the training yard. His squad was meeting for drills today, since their next patrol was tomorrow night.

The midmorning sun was bright, the air warm. There were a dozen men and women out on the running track, and half his squad was already at the weapons shed, picking out practice swords.

"Morning, Cap," Aidan called, tossing him a wooden sword.

"Good morning, team. We'll run through some technique drills first, then some sparring, and top it off with a nice, brisk run. Sound good?"

"No, terrible," Judah drawled. He was fresh from graduation, nineteen and far more sarcastic than he should be. Nathan cuffed him over the back of the head, and he laughed.

The day passed at a crawl. Nathan was glad he'd dropped his things in the locker room, because the constant urge to check his phone was almost overwhelming. He

wanted to know if Storm had responded, and the chance to see him again had something like hope taking root in his gut. He couldn't stop thinking about how warm his chest had been under Nathan's palm. Not many guys were bigger than him. Nathan was six foot one. He'd never thought being crowded against a wall by someone taller than him would give him such a sinful thrill. Logically, he knew nothing could come of this infatuation, but no amount of well-reasoned logic could stop him from obsessing. No one had ever made him feel like this before.

He waited until he'd showered in the locker room and gone back to his car to head home for the afternoon before allowing himself to check his phone. By then, he was practically vibrating with need.

What's yours? I'll pick you up and take you there.

Heat rolled through him. Storm wanted to know where he lived? Just because he wanted to know, or because he'd been instructed not to give their Rink's address away? If it was the latter, he couldn't exactly blame them. But he really hoped it was the former.

Going to blindfold me on the way there?

He put the car in drive, but his phone chimed again before he could move out of his parking spot.

Only if you're into that kind of thing.

Nathan had to hand it to him. He managed to both give nothing away and give Nathan a strange fluttery feeling in his gut with that one sentence. Rather than risk embarrassing himself with a response to that, he typed out his address and tucked the phone away, determined to ignore it while he drove. He had to get home and make sure everything was presentable.

Or maybe he should avoid inviting Storm inside at all. He couldn't risk getting too friendly. Whatever had happened between them in the coffee shop was... strange and intense. How much worse might that be when they were alone in his house?

When he pulled into the narrow driveway at home, he paused, staring at the facade of the little white stucco house and wondering what Storm would see when he looked at it. He'd lived on the grounds of HQ for years while he saved up for it. It was quaint, surrounded by trees and on a narrow street, not far from Angeles National Forest. There was a brick walkway and stoop. It wasn't a big place. Less than a quarter of an acre, with a privacy fence edging the property, and the house itself was not quite a thousand square feet. But he'd lived alone all his adult life, so it was all he needed.

Telling himself he didn't care what a demon thought about the home he'd worked for, he threw himself from the car, yawning as he keyed open the front door.

He needed a nap or an afternoon coffee if he wanted to be alert for this encounter tonight. Maybe both. Toeing his shoes off by the door, he collapsed on the sofa, promising himself he'd get up and make coffee in just a few minutes.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 6

Storm

The house was somehow exactly what Storm might've pictured for Nathan. Both it and the lawn were clean and meticulously cared for. The house was an obvious labor of love for him. Storm might go so far as to call it a sanctuary. And here he was, being invited to observe it. Nathan could've refused to tell him where he lived. He could've given him a public location like the coffee house for Storm to pick him up from. Instead, he'd invited him here. It sent a private little thrill through him that Nathan trusted him enough to let him come here.

The light beside the front door was on, and the looming trees blocked out the last fading rays of the sun. Storm shut off his truck and strode quickly to the door. He didn't want Nathan to rush out before Storm saw the inside.

He knocked—and waited. And waited. And knocked again.

After a few minutes, the cherry wood door opened, revealing a disheveled Nathan. “Sorry, I’m so sorry. Have you been waiting long?” He squinted at Storm, his hair askew, and Storm resisted the urge to reach out and touch it.

“No. Just got here. Did I wake you?”

“Uh.” He glanced over, and Storm leaned in. The invisible press of holy warding kept him from setting foot inside, but he was able to follow Nathan’s gaze to the navy blue sofa inside the living room. The impression of his head on one of the throw pillows

was still slowly rising.

“I did. Should we do this another time?” That was the human thing to offer, right? It would be weird for him to push his way inside and tell Nathan to show him how he’d been lying.

“No, no, I still want to. I didn’t mean to...” He trailed off, his shoulders sagging. His brow furrowed and his gaze fell away, like he was disappointed in himself for falling asleep.

Storm risked stepping closer, crowding into the doorway as much as the warding would allow. He wanted those slate-gray eyes on him, wanted to be the sole focus of Nathan’s attention. What he knew of the guild wasn’t great. If they were working him so hard he was falling asleep the moment he sat down, that wasn’t exactly his fault, and Storm didn’t want him berating himself for that or any other reason.

Nathan straightened, looking up at him. His gray eyes were soft and trusting, if a little nonplussed. Was Ira right? Did Nathan feel inexplicably drawn toward Storm? Goddamn, he hoped so.

“Long day?” Storm asked softly.

Nathan’s head moved in a noncommittal way. “No more than usual. I just didn’t sleep all that well last night.” His cheeks darkened, and Storm felt there was something more than he was saying.

Storm gripped the doorway, needing an anchor to keep him from reaching in and dragging Nathan closer. “Lock up. We’ll get coffee on the way to the Rink.”

Something complicated crossed Nathan’s expression, and then he shook himself. “No, no, I can just?—”

“Shut up.” He said it gently, but Nathan’s mouth snapped closed. Interesting . No anger followed, though Storm thought there was a flicker of surprise in Nathan’s eyes. “There are a dozen coffee places between here and there. It’s no big deal. Close up and come on.”

Nathan’s throat bobbed hard. “Okay,” he agreed breathlessly, reaching for his keys. He turned and grabbed his laptop off the coffee table, locked the door behind them, and followed Storm out into the night.

Very interesting. Was he such a good soldier that he’d follow any orders? Or was this a more personal reaction to Storm in particular? He wanted to find out.

Storm did love to see a strong man yield. How far would Nathan let him push?

In the cab of the truck, Nathan’s scent filled the air, like teak wood and leather and the faint, honey-sweet scent of his blood. He fought the urge to reach over and pull him across the middle seat.

“Brave of you to get into the vehicle with a demon,” Storm teased as he carefully backed out of Nathan’s driveway, mindful of where the fence ended and the mailbox was.

“I’m in no danger with you,” he said confidently.

Storm glanced over at him. “How do you know?”

He frowned slightly, like he hadn’t considered it until now. “I don’t know. Just a feeling, I guess.”

It didn’t take long to find a random coffee shop with a drive-thru. Nathan was staring listlessly out his window, so Storm reached over and fit his palm over his knee,

giving it a shake and delighting in the way the denim pulled taut across his leg.

Nathan startled at the touch. “Yes? What?”

“What do you want?”

“You don’t have to—” At Storm’s resolute look, he went quiet. Those slate gray eyes went soft and vulnerable, like cloud fluff.

“What do you want?” he asked again.

“Just a... black coffee, I guess.”

That was what he’d had at their first meeting, too, but Storm didn’t recall him drinking much of it. Still, he placed the order, and then they were back out on the road, the scent of coffee mingling with Nathan’s mouthwatering scent.

“No coffee for you?” Nathan asked, eyeing him.

“Not right now.”

He hummed, going quiet.

Nathan wasn’t much of a talker, but that was fine. The silence between them was companionable, and Storm liked the quiet. His job at In Extremis had involved standing around for ten hours of it, after all. Always apart from the action, in the dark and the silence outside the chaos.

When they pulled into the parking lot of the Rink, the others’ cars were already there. He parked beside Malachi’s vintage Mustang and glanced over.

Nathan was frozen with his cup halfway to his lips, his eyes on the Rink—which, admittedly, had seen better days. The metal siding was dented in places, dirty and rusted. Weeds grew up around the edges and through cracks in the pavement, although they'd at least filled in the holes with gravel at some point. The only sign of life were the cars in the lot and the light that glowed through the glass door. Not for the first time, he wondered if they should replace the glass with something more durable. Enchanted metal, maybe. Something to keep out the unseemlies—human and demon alike.

“Looks nice, huh?” He fought to keep his expression serious.

Nathan seemed to be trying to lighten his expression into something that passed for approval. “It’s, uh—yeah, it’s nice.”

Storm sniggered. “It’s okay, I won’t tell them it’s a hovel if you won’t. They’re kind of protective of the place.”

“Of this place?” he exclaimed, the most animated Storm had seen him yet.

He laughed, throwing his head back with it, and he noticed the way Nathan’s eyes brightened at the sound. “Yeah. Baby’s first secret base, y’know?”

Nathan chuckled. “Right.”

He gestured to the building. “Come on. Looks like they’re all waiting inside. Let’s go.”

Nathan nodded, slipping from the truck. Storm paused just long enough to check the weight in the coffee cup. Still mostly full, as he’d suspected. Why order something he didn’t like?

Storm left it. If Nathan didn't want it, that was his choice. He waited for Storm in front of the truck, hugging his laptop to his chest and looking uncertain about how to proceed. Anxiety cut deep lines in his radiant face.

"You good?" Storm asked as he locked the truck.

Nathan nodded—then shook his head. He shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. It's—I'm fine."

"Tell me." It wasn't a question, and Nathan obeyed once again, sending a thrill through Storm.

His face twisted. "I figure the guild isn't well-liked in there. And I am ... the guild, in a way. A representative of it." He turned his left hand, looking down at the ring. "I'm just not sure how this meeting is going to go."

Storm drew closer, delight simmering through him when Nathan didn't move away. "The humans don't talk much about their time with the guild. Ira's probably the most open about what it was like. But they're all in agreement that you were one of the good ones. Ira gave them your phone number in case they needed to contact someone they could trust on the inside. Some of the demons are probably going to be a little more wary, because their only experience with the guild is violence. Malachi, in particular, almost lost Luke because of them, and he's a grudge-holder."

"Malachi is... a halfling like you, yes?" Nathan's gaze met his, darting between his crimson eyes.

"That's right." He held a hand out toward the building. "Come. It'll be fine."

Nathan fell into step with him, and when they reached the door, Storm opened it and gestured for him to go through first. He ducked his head bashfully, and Storm wanted

to grab his jaw and force his head up to drink in the sight of his pretty blush.

The kids were absent, which was probably for the best. The others were all waiting around the air hockey table. Malachi hovered protectively beside Luke with his arms folded and a scowl set above his crimson eyes. His hair was tied back in a messy bun, like he'd gotten ready in a hurry. Luke and Alex both sat on stools. Alex was reading over something from a file folder, one of Talon's arms draped over his shoulders. Ira sat sideways on the table itself, one leg curled under him and the other swinging idly, brushing Wolf's leg on each pass. Xyra and Shadrach weren't in sight, which was also probably for the best, in the latter's case. Shadrach liked to wind people up, and tensions were high enough without his help.

"I suppose my companion needs no introduction," Storm said, waving a hand at Nathan.

Luke and Alex stood, smiling easily, and rounded the table to greet him. They shook hands one by one, and Nathan said, "Thank you for allowing me to come here. I appreciate the level of trust you've given me, and I want you to know I won't squander it."

"For your sake, I hope not," Talon said coolly.

The sudden urge to snarl clawed up Storm's throat, and he turned away sharply to crush it back down. If Talon truly wanted to kill Nathan, there was nothing Storm could fucking do about it. As a halfling, he was plenty stronger than a human, but a leviathan like Talon would wipe the floor with him. Alex wouldn't want Talon to hurt Nathan anyway, so he was just making idle threats to make sure Nathan didn't try anything. But knowing Storm would be helpless to protect Nathan left him feeling... unsettled.

When he turned back around, Wolf and Ira were watching him knowingly. Wolf

raised one hand out beside him, palm down, and gently lowered it. Calm down , the gesture said.

Storm took a deep, fortifying breath and consciously released the tension from his body. Being at odds with Talon wouldn't do any of them any good, and he had no claim over Nathan yet—no matter what the selfish little voice in the back of his head insisted.

Mine, mine, he's mine.

“Can we give you a tour?” Alex offered. “We’ve done a lot of work on the place.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Nathan agreed sincerely. “I’d love to see how you operate out of a place like this.”

Before they wandered off, Storm snagged Nathan’s arm. He turned automatically, his gaze bright and eager. It settled into something softer when their eyes met—no less bright or eager, but more vulnerable somehow. Storm smiled, gently tugging the laptop from his arms.

“I’ll take this. You can show us the footage after the tour,” he said.

The tension was fading from Nathan’s limbs, and he relinquished his laptop without question.

“I’ll leave it on the table for you,” Storm added, nodding at the table.

Nathan followed his gaze—and did a double-take. “Is that an air hockey game?”

Storm fought down a smile. “It is.”

Nathan's mouth curved into a grin. "Does it work?"

Storm pursed his lips. He wouldn't laugh. He wouldn't. "I don't think so. That's why we use it as a table now."

Nathan clicked his tongue in disappointment. "Shame."

Storm gave him a nudge. "Go on, take the tour."

Nathan joined Alex and Luke, and they led him across the training area toward the back rooms. With nothing better to do, Storm wandered over to the table and carefully laid the sleek, silver laptop on the polished white surface of the table.

"How was he on the ride over?" Talon asked, watching them disappear into the back hallway.

"Fine. He was a little nervous to come, I think."

"He should be," Talon remarked.

Storm's jaw pulsed.

"For the record, I think this is going to sink like a stone," he continued, glancing at each of them in turn to gauge their expressions. "But Alex wants to try and play nice, so I'm willing to make an effort until the guild inevitably gives me a reason to go nuclear."

"The guild may," Storm allowed, "but he won't. If something happens, it won't be because of Nathan."

"How do you know?" Talon asked coolly. "You barely know this human. You've met

him, what, twice now?"

Anger flashed through him. "I just do," he snapped.

Talon cocked his head to one side, studying him intently, and then said succinctly, "Son of a bitch."

Storm sighed, turning away. He should've just kept his mouth shut.

"Play nice, Talon," Ira said in that knowing way of his. He was the only one apart from Alex who could get Talon to see reason.

"Have you got a hard-on for him?" Talon asked Storm with exasperation, and Storm gnashed his teeth. "We can't keep picking up strays."

"That's exactly what we're going to do," Ira said calmly before Storm could snap. "For as long as the guild continues to mistreat its members and drive them toward us, we'll keep taking them in. We'll gather allies and grow our operation."

"I never wanted this to be an operation," Talon said through a groan.

"But it will be," Wolf said, as calmly as his human counterpart. If Storm and Nathan were half as well-matched as these two, Storm could barely wait to begin. "We all see it coming. Ira has said he wouldn't be the last human to turn sides. There'll be others. If the next one happens to be this one, so be it. We could do worse. They all talk about that guy like he's a brother they haven't had a chance to visit in a while. He's a strong warrior who's trying to do the right thing. Let's not ruin it before it starts by being unnecessarily distrusting."

"Unnecessarily?" Talon asked. "Ask Malachi here if he's unnecessarily distrusting after what they did to Luke."

Malachi grunted, apparently unwilling to get involved in the conversation. He'd turned his head to one side, listening to the humans talking in one of the back rooms. Their voices filtered, quiet but clear, to the demons' enhanced hearing. A few moments later, laughter filled the air, and Storm forgot his anger as he picked out Nathan's unfamiliar laughter, like wind chimes in a breeze.

"Nathan didn't agree with what they did to Luke," Ira said. Storm didn't understand how he maintained his sense of calm all the time. He wanted to break the goddamn table. "But paladins are peons in that guild. They don't make the decisions, and you've seen what happens when they disobey. Give Nate the benefit of the doubt. He's here. He's trying, and it's probably put him at odds with the loud majority of the guild already."

Talon huffed out a sigh through his nose. "I'll reserve judgment."

"That's all I ask," Ira said loftily, smug now that he'd won.

The humans returned, and when they passed under the disco ball and the colored lights, Nathan craned his neck back to look at it all, the mirrored ceiling reflecting their images back at him. Storm fought down a laugh as he made himself dizzy, stumbling a bit on the padded mat.

"Y'know, I always wanted to come to a place like this as a kid," he said. "I can't believe you bought one and turned it into an actual base of operations, but I've got to say, I love it. The outside looks like something out of a horror movie, though. You might want to hang up a sign or something so people know they haven't stumbled into a slasher."

Luke snorted, easing through the gap in the partition. "Yeah, we know. It's not necessarily a bad thing. Maybe we'll get a sign after we figure out what to call ourselves."

Alex and Luke returned to their places beside Talon and Malachi, and a quiet sense of satisfaction swept through Storm when Nathan rounded the table to stand beside him. Did he even realize he'd done it?

On Nathan's other side, Ira asked, "How are things at the guild these days?"

Nathan bowed his head with a sigh, bracing his hands on the table. "Not great. The council still isn't in agreement about how to handle the halflings, and Sloan has started rallying the captains to help sway them. Many believe wholeheartedly that they should be eradicated. Too few of us recognize that they aren't killing people and that focusing on them would, at the very least, be a waste of resources. And a moral failing, in my opinion." He shook his head. "I'm afraid that once enough of them start calling for blood, the holdouts on the council will give in to keep the peace. I believe they're blinded by their pride. Somehow, they've internalized the three of you leaving with some sort of personal insult against the guild and everyone in it. They've been forcing the captains to check in with their squads and then report any suspicious behavior to Sloan. There's even talk of phone and bag searches to make sure no one has been in contact with any halflings. I've been trying to do my part as a voice of reason, but there aren't enough of us. We're drowned out by the hate."

Grim silence followed, until Alex broke it. "What does that mean for us?"

"Sloan specifically asked me to find out where your base is located. I don't know why, but I worry he's planning something."

"Of course he is," Talon said. "Prideful men don't stop until they've had their perceived revenge. He'll keep coming after us until he thinks we've paid."

"Well, I won't tell them I know where this place is," Nathan said firmly. "As far as they're going to be aware, we met in a public location just like Storm and I did when we first met. I'm going to tell them you're all far too paranoid to let me anywhere

near your homes or your place of work. If they don't know where this place is, they can't attack it like they did In Extremis."

"They know where we live, though," Luke pointed out. "They've known for a while. We were being tailed for weeks."

"They've backed off recently," Alex said. "I haven't seen any paladins since the attack at the club."

"Yes, Sloan told them to stand down while he worked on getting council support for another attack. If possible, you should all take this opportunity to find new places to live, at least for a while. It's important that you stay safe. I can also... There are some books on runes in the archives. It's forbidden for guild members to use magic, because it's considered satanic, but that shouldn't be a problem for you guys. Ward this place, ward your homes. Anyone who means you harm shouldn't be able to cross the threshold."

Hadn't Storm just been thinking about doing exactly that on their way inside?

"That'd be fantastic," Ira said. "They don't know where Wolf and I live, as far as I know, but having the extra insurance would make me feel a lot better."

"I've got a second apartment. Alex and I can move there," Talon said.

"We can move, too," Malachi said. "I've got the funds for a second place."

Nathan looked at Storm, waiting.

"I can move, too," Storm said. "I don't already have a place like Talon, but I've got plenty of money stashed away. Shouldn't be too hard to find something."

“Good,” Nathan said. “I’ll make copies of the warding spells and send them to you tomorrow, then. There’s a couple of legitimate magic shops in LA, if you need supplies.”

“We’re aware,” Talon said. “Some of them pay to use demon blood in potions. I know of some halflings who donate.”

Alex looked uncertain. “Magic? Really?”

Nathan nodded. “There aren’t many who use it nowadays, but it’s real.”

“The guild played a big hand in almost eradicating it, actually,” Talon said. “Christians and their witch hunts, y’know?”

Alex grimaced. “Right.”

“Don’t let the King James version fool you,” Nathan said. “Witchcraft isn’t evil. Magic is just a tool, no different than the swords and holy rites we use. You guys are outnumbered, big time. Use everything you can get your hands on, including magic. Some will be more adept with it than others. I suspect Ira will have more power at his disposal, but it’ll work if you believe, just like the rest of the rites we use.”

“We’ll give it a try,” Luke said. “I’m willing to use anything if it’ll help us protect ourselves. We’ve got enemies on both sides, after all.”

Nathan tilted his head. “You do? That doesn’t sound good.”

“The guild are no friends, of course, but we’ve recently had trouble with someone amongst the halflings, too,” Luke explained. “Lilith. She’s kind of like a mob boss to the demons, and she doesn’t like us. She owns the club, and she blames us for the attack.”

Nathan winced. “Shit. I’m sorry. Do you need help with her? If paladins want to kill some halflings, maybe we can aim them at each other instead of you.”

Talon snorted out a laugh, then covered his mouth like he didn’t mean to let it escape. Alex grinned at him, nudging him playfully.

Nathan laughed, too, but added, “I’m serious! Would that work?”

“I have no idea,” Talon admitted, shaking his head. It was reassuring, at least, that Nathan had inadvertently found a way to put Talon at ease. “It might just make things worse. If you give the paladins leave to attack some halflings, what’s to stop them from attacking all?”

Nathan inclined his head. “That would be a risk, yes, but I hate to think you guys are out here with no backup.”

“We watch each other’s backs,” Talon said. “And there are a few of us not here tonight.”

“That’s good,” Nathan said. “I just wish there was more I could do.”

Unfamiliar affection filled Storm. Nathan was a good man who probably deserved far better than Storm, but he wasn’t going to let that stop him.

“Which reminds me,” Nathan said, grimacing, and pulled his laptop toward himself. “I’ve got something to show you guys. Sloan gave me a case. It’s something we’ve never seen before.” He opened up the laptop and went to his email. “He emailed me a copy of the video. I thought it might be best to show you.”

They all crowded around the laptop to watch, and Nathan stepped out of the way as he hit the play button on the video. Storm watched the shift of his back as he went.

Thanks to Nathan's explanation at the coffee shop, he already knew what he'd see on the video, and looking at his human was a far nicer view than exploding hearts.

"What are we looking for?" Luke asked.

"You'll know it when you see it," Nathan replied.

Storm glanced distractedly between the laptop and Nathan's pensive expression—until the man on the screen fell to his knees.

"Whoa," Alex said in alarm. "What the hell?"

"Oh my God!" Luke exclaimed when the figure's chest burst open, turning to look at Malachi like he couldn't stand to watch any longer. Malachi cradled his face and kissed his temple.

"Ugh, possessors," Talon said, rolling his eyes. "This isn't new. This is, in fact, very old."

Nathan turned toward him. "What? You know what that was?"

"Of course. Old school. Possessor demons don't get a foothold much these days. Their powers have weakened considerably as the humans' population on Earth has grown."

"Possessor? Like The Exorcist?" Alex said, tugging Talon's arm around his shoulders.

"Exactly. They're rare these days. Unlike the monsters you hunt, they don't have the power to come here without a host body. Why this one tried to burst out through its host, I can't say. That would be the thing to investigate, though."

“I was going by the morgue in the morning to look at the body,” Nathan said. “I’d be happy to have one of you along.”

“I’ll go,” Storm said quickly.

Nathan met his eyes, and Storm felt ensnared. Everything else faded away, and all he saw was Nathan.

Ira’s matter-of-fact voice finally drew his attention. “Good idea. Storm can recognize demonic signatures and report back to us.”

Satisfaction spread through him when Nathan didn’t protest, despite the uncertainty on his face. “Okay. Sounds good.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 7

Storm

It was late by the time they all said goodnight. Storm knew the others would all wait to leave after he'd taken Nathan away, although he seemed to have made some headway in Talon and Malachi's esteem. They weren't glaring quite as hard by the end of the meeting, and if Nathan noticed their ire in the beginning, he hid it well. He might have been nervous before they went in, but he didn't let it show in front of the others at all. Storm was pleased to have been privy to it. It felt like Nathan trusted him.

"I don't think I said anything earlier, but thank you for driving me," he said as they pulled out onto the highway.

Storm glanced over at Nathan's handsome profile. "No problem. How are you holding up? Need another cup of coffee?" He didn't mention how little of the first one Nathan drank.

"No, that's okay. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Who are the other people Talon said weren't there tonight? Halflings?"

"Not all of them. Xyra is a halfling. Shadrach is a leviathan, and there are two?—"

“A leviathan? What’s that?”

Oh, right. Alex said the guild thought Talon was a halfling. “Talon is a leviathan. The ones you guys call black-eyed halflings aren’t halflings at all. They’re leviathans—well, usually. Lots of demons have black eyes, actually.”

Nathan stared. “Seriously?”

“Yep. Different powers, different origins. At some point in history, the guild assumed the halflings were all demons who looked like humans. But that isn’t true. Leviathans look human, but they never were. There are a few others who also look human. Mozgorans try, but they always look off . Behemoths look relatively human. There are also things like kalmachs and the harbinger, but I haven’t heard of either of those being topside in centuries.”

“I’ve heard of mozgorans and behemoths, although I didn’t know the latter looked human. I don’t know anyone who’s ever seen one of those, and there’s very little about them in our archive.”

“As far as I know, only our little group of humans is aware that Talon and Shadrach are leviathans. We’d prefer to keep it that way.” It probably could’ve gone without saying, given that Nathan seemed to have no trouble keeping all their other secrets, but he’d rather be safe than sorry.

And to his credit, Nathan nodded at once. “Oh, absolutely. I’m giving Sloan the bare minimum. I don’t want to give him anything he might use against you guys.”

Storm cast him a pleased smile. “I figured. Just wanted to hear it.”

The rest of the drive passed in silence. Storm drove as slow as traffic would allow, savoring every moment in Nathan’s presence. When he pulled into Nathan’s

driveway, neither of them moved for a moment, and then Nathan picked up his cup, fidgeting with the edge of the lid.

“Thanks again for the ride—and the coffee,” Nathan said.

Storm was loath to say goodnight. He wanted more. Would Nathan let him push? So far, he’d never told Storm no, never protested anything Storm told him to do.

He couldn’t resist trying. “You could invite me in.”

Nathan blinked at him, his lips parting in surprise.

Storm leaned in. “Maybe for a cup of coffee.” His voice was low, melodic. “Invite me in, sunshine.”

Nathan’s eyelids fluttered at the endearment. “Okay.”

A sense of power shuddered through Storm. This human was so incredible. So strong, and yet he yielded so prettily to everything Storm suggested. How far could he push? Nathan obviously felt the same pull that he did. He wouldn’t trust him so instinctively if he didn’t.

Invited beyond the threshold? Alone in Nathan’s house together? There was no better opportunity to explore what they might be to each other.

He crossed the walkway in long, easy strides at Nathan’s back, resisting the urge to lean in and smell him as Nathan pressed the key into the lock. He turned as he stepped inside, flicking a switch by the door that bathed them in light.

Nathan’s slate-gray eyes met his. “Come in, Storm.”

A shiver rolled down his spine at the sound of his name on Nathan's lips. Storm pressed closer, and Nathan stepped back as Storm crossed the threshold.

Nathan set his keys in a ceramic bowl by the door, and Storm looked around with interest while he went to the kitchen.

It was sparsely decorated, which Storm might've expected from a rigid soldier boy, but there were some elements of his personality. There wasn't much decoration on the walls, but colorful throw pillows decorated the couch. There was a row of movies in the entertainment console under the dark television. On the right, the polished, square dining table sat beneath a farmhouse-style chandelier made of weathered wood.

Beyond that, the pocket-sized kitchen was small but well-equipped, with a doorway to the dining room and another to the hallway, the walls open above the counters. Nathan was visible within, pouring coffee grounds into the machine and pressing the button to turn it on.

"Nice place you've got here," Storm said, stopping in the doorway.

Nathan turned, leaning back against the counter while the coffeemaker gurgled. His smile was sheepish. "Thanks. It's not much, but it's all mine."

"What time do you want to go to the morgue tomorrow?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "Midmorning, I guess. We're patrolling tomorrow night, which means I'll need to sleep in a bit to get enough rest."

Oh, good. That meant Storm didn't have to hurry out tonight.

"What happens on a patrol? You fight the big, bad demons?" He drifted closer.

Nathan's mouth twitched with amusement. "Exactly." Concern flashed across his face. "I mean. That doesn't bother you, does it?"

Storm snorted. "No, sunshine."

Nathan's eyes softened again at the nickname, and Storm dared to get even closer, almost lining their bodies up.

"The monsters you hunt are like animals. They aren't capable of higher forms of thinking. Just hunt, kill, eat."

Nathan laughed, arching back with it. Storm wanted to touch that exposed abdomen. "You're saying we're the animal control of the supernatural world?"

That surprised a laugh out of Storm, too. "I've never thought of it like that, but I guess so."

Nathan tipped his head back to look thoughtfully at the ceiling, putting the long column of his throat on display. He had no idea what these vulnerable positions were doing to Storm. "Ah, well. There are worse things to be."

Storm wanted to push . Their shoes bumped together, and Nathan straightened, his gaze darting down Storm's body and back up, as though just realizing how close they were.

"Mm. Tell me something."

"What?" Nathan's voice was breathless. Anticipatory.

"Do you feel it, too?"

His throat bobbed. “Feel... what?”

Storm brushed his knuckles against Nathan’s stomach. The muscles twitched under his touch, and Nathan’s breath stalled. Storm stretched his fingers out, flattening his palm against the thin fabric of his T-shirt. He expected to be rebuffed, but Nathan’s hands only tightened on the edge of the counter behind him. His chest heaved with quick, shallow breaths.

He wasn’t telling him no, so Storm slowly slid his hand up. The fabric bunched under his hand, dragging his shirt up to reveal a strip of skin and an enthralling trail of hair that disappeared below his waistband. At his neckline, he curled his fingers around bare skin, loving the way the pulse thundered below his fingertips.

“Storm,” Nathan murmured. The sound of his name, breathy and uncertain, rolled down his spine to pool in his belly. “What are you doing?”

“I asked you a question,” Storm said softly. “Do you feel it, too?”

“Feel what?” This time, Storm felt the bob of Nathan’s throat under his palm.

“The pull.”

Nathan moved then, wrapping a hand around Storm’s wrist—though he didn’t push him away. “No?” He sounded more uncertain than ever.

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

Nathan huffed. “It-It doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?” He was quite certain that nothing had ever mattered more—at least not to him.

“We can’t.”

“Says who?” Storm leaned in, pinning him to the counter with his body, and a quiet mewl left Nathan.

He squirmed, rubbing himself against Storm. There was a very telling bulge below his zipper. “The guild, of course.”

Storm shifted, pressing a thigh between his and giving him something to rut against, which he did immediately. His head fell back in abandon, exposing him further for Storm to claim. He raised his free hand to cradle the back of Nathan’s head. It was a powerful position; he could snap Nathan’s neck easily like this. Nathan either didn’t notice or didn’t care—or he just trusted Storm that much. Storm desperately hoped for the latter.

“Your body seems to be telling you something else,” Storm pointed out.

“My body is stupid,” Nathan said, his thighs clamping around Storm’s like he was trying to stop himself.

A possessive growl rolled out of Storm. “I think your body has the right idea.”

“This doesn’t—I’m not gay.” But his hands grasped at Storm’s waist like he was hungry for more, pulling Storm tightly against him. “I’ve been with women all my life.”

“It is possible to like more than one gender.” Did that mean Storm would be his first man? That sent a delighted, possessive thrill through him. He wanted to be his first and only .

“But I... don’t? Or at least I never thought I did. I don’t know what it is about you.

You just make me feel...”

Storm understood. He felt the same. “Then why don’t you find out?” he coaxed. “Kiss me.”

Nathan stilled, his eyes falling to Storm’s mouth. “I... I can’t.”

How far could he push? “ Kiss me .”

Nathan lunged toward him like his strength to resist failed him, crushing their mouths together. Storm wanted to howl victoriously, lifting his fingers to Nathan’s jaw and prying his mouth open to press his tongue inside. They kissed long after the coffeemaker stopped gurgling, Nathan working himself against Storm’s thigh. His own erection pressed maddeningly against Nathan’s hip, but he ignored it for now. There would be time for him to take his pleasure.

He fisted his hand in Nathan’s shirt, dragging it up and over his head. Nathan’s eyes were heavy-lidded with lust as Storm kissed him again, deep and hungry. He begrudgingly released his jaw only to wrench open his fly. He would take him right there in the kitchen if Nathan would let him.

But no. If Nathan had never been with a man before, Storm wanted to be sure he enjoyed himself. Wanted to be sure he came back for more.

“Show me your bedroom,” he ordered.

Nathan must have forgotten all his reasons for not doing this, because he pushed into Storm’s body, guiding him backward without breaking their kiss. Storm chuckled, sucking Nathan’s tongue as he staggered through the doorway into the hall. Nathan pushed Storm’s shirt up and off, leaving it and his own sneakers in the hallway like breadcrumbs.

“Right here,” Nathan said, gesturing to his left, Storm’s right.

He turned them, backing Nathan toward the bed and pushing him down. Pausing above him, he braced one boot on the edge of the bed and pulled the zipper down. Nathan rose up on his elbows to watch as he did the second one. Then he focused on Nathan, hooking his fingers in his waistband and yanking his jeans and underwear off at once. His cock bobbed free, and he crawled up the bed, panting unevenly.

“Lube?” They would certainly need it for what Storm wanted to do.

“Um. Yeah. Drawer.” He pointed at the bedside table, his face and neck aflame.

Storm fetched it, then crawled onto the bed with Nathan, starting at the bottom and insistently parting Nathan’s hairy legs to make room for himself between them.

“Storm,” he started, uncertain.

“Yes, get used to saying my name,” he growled, nosing the hair on his inner thighs, less coarse than what was on his lower legs. Nathan might’ve been nervous, but Storm wouldn’t do anything he didn’t want. He kissed his way up Nathan’s pale skin to the hard cock twitching eagerly for him.

Nathan’s muffled moans filled the air as Storm mouthed a wet line up his length and planted a sucking kiss to the head. One hand stroking Nathan’s thigh and enticing him to keep them spread nice and wide, he raised the other to Nathan’s mouth, prying his lip from between his teeth.

“Let me hear you, sunshine.”

Nathan squirmed. “Kay.”

He wrapped a hand around Nathan's base, pumping slowly as he took half his length into his mouth. Nathan moaned, long and low, pistoning his hips up and sliding deeper. Fuck, that was nice, the way his abdominal muscles rippled with effort. Storm's free hand squeezed some lube into his palm. Nathan didn't seem to notice, staring up at the ceiling with an exquisite frown on his face, his lips parted rapturously. Storm slipped his free hand under his hip, guiding him to thrust up again and again.

He wanted to ruin Nathan for anyone else. Wanted him to be absolutely desperate for Storm and Storm alone.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 8

Nathan

Nathan could barely think past the hot, wet suction of Storm's mouth around his cock. He'd never been with anyone who could just take it like this, letting Nathan thrust as deep and hard as he wanted into his throat. It was unnatural. Addictive. Dangerous.

When he felt pressure against his hole, a moan tore from his mouth that surprised even him. He'd never done this, and before tonight, he would've assumed he wasn't interested in trying it. But he was harder than ever, and sweat prickled along his skin. Storm's throat was tight and perfect, and the dull burn of his slick finger entering Nathan's body sent him to new heights. A part of Storm was inside him. His hips stilled as he turned his attention inward, toward the new sensations filling him. He was on fire, he was burning up. His hips rotated, and he felt Storm's finger slide deeper with the movement, brushing something that had his cock jerking hard.

"God," he whined.

Storm hummed, the sound vibrating down his length. When he bobbed his head this time, he moved his finger in time with it. Up and down, in and out. A sob spilled from Nathan's mouth. Storm worked him over like a starving man, like he was hungry for it.

"I'm—I'm—" His fingers scrabbled at Storm's shoulders.

Storm pulled off with a pop before the pleasure inside him could reach its peak, crawling up Nathan's body and urging his mouth open again, slipping his tongue inside. His hands hooked under Nathan's knees, urging them to spread wide. It wasn't a position he was used to, and the vulnerability of it, the unfamiliar stretch of his inner thighs, set him ablaze, heat crackling under his skin.

"You want more, sunshine?" Storm crooned, slipping a hand back down between their bodies. "You think you can take all of me?"

Nathan whimpered, unable to speak as two fingers pressed inside this time. His breath caught in his throat, and Storm swallowed his moans with deep, hungry kisses, distracting him as a third finger eased in, too. The burning stretch was more intense this time, but it eased as Storm gently massaged his inner walls, tagging his prostate over and over until his flagging cock was rock hard once more.

"Please, please," he heard himself say. He wanted to come—he needed it. He'd never felt so wholly at someone else's mercy, so incapable of taking control for his own needs.

"Soon," Storm growled, teeth nipping at Nathan's neck and shoulder.

When he was rolling his body up against Storm's, urgently trying to take his fingers deeper or rub his cock on Storm's washboard abs, he finally had mercy on him. He sat back on his heels and reached for the lube again, extracting his fingers and slicking his cock.

Lightning buzzed down Nathan's spine. Were they really about to do this? He couldn't think of anything he'd ever wanted more, but was that normal? He barely knew Storm, and he was a demon. Was he really about to jeopardize everything to be with this one man?

He tensed, pressing an elbow into the mattress to sit up.

“Stop thinking.”

The low growl cut through his spiraling thoughts, and his mind went quiet, floating into blank space. Some deep, animal part of him trusted Storm. Just like in his dream, Storm would take care of him. Make him feel good. His eyes snapped toward Storm’s crimson ones, and Storm’s lips parted as he carefully studied Nathan’s expression.

“Good boy,” Storm praised, stroking his belly, and Nathan’s breath left in a whoosh, the last of the tension draining from his body once more. “You can take me, now. Just relax and let me in.”

Storm pushed his legs up and apart, spreading him open wide, and then pressed the fat head of his cock to Nathan’s entrance. He squeezed his eyes shut, preparing for the burn. He didn’t realize he’d gone tight as a bowstring until a gentle hand laid across the base of his neck.

His eyes flew open. Storm was leaning over him.

“Eyes on me, sunshine. Don’t get lost in that head of yours.”

Nathan swallowed hard, fighting the absurd urge to cry. No one had ever been able to read him so well. It seemed unfair that it should be a demon who could do so now. Crimson filled his vision as Storm’s fingers gripped his hips tight. He pressed forward, and Nathan bore down, his breaths rabbiting until Storm’s thick length slipped past the first ring of muscle, easing inside.

“There it is,” Storm said, tunneling deeper and deeper one inch at a time.

“It’s too much,” Nathan whimpered, clawing at Storm’s flanks. He’d never wanted

anything more, but he wasn't sure he could take it.

"No, sunshine. I'm almost there. You're taking me so well." He rested his elbows on either side of Nathan's head, cradling his head and kissing him softly.

"God ." He didn't know if it was a prayer or a curse.

Finally, Storm bottomed out, bringing their hips flush. Then he stopped, letting Nathan breathe.

"You're so tight," Storm groaned, mouthing at his clavicle, his mouth damp and hot. "Fit me like a glove. Fucking perfect."

Nathan threaded his fingers through Storm's pale hair. No one had ever called him that before, and something fragile cracked open inside his chest. Storm worked a hand between them, wrapping around his half-hard shaft and pumping firmly, teasing him back to full hardness.

"Storm," he moaned.

"How're you feeling, sunshine?"

The burn was fading, leaving only fullness and heat behind. It was so overwhelming. He'd never felt anything like it. "Better, I think."

"You think?" Storm pulled out slightly and pushed back in. Hot pleasure sparkled through him.

Nathan gasped. "Yeah."

"Good." Storm bared his teeth.

He pulled out all the way this time, slowly, until only the head of his cock remained, and then tunneled back inside. Pleasure rocked through Nathan's body, and his back arched.

"Very good," Storm growled, sending a shudder down Nathan's spine, and did it again. He pushed back in harder this time, slapping their hips together, and Nathan cried out.

He found a rhythm like that, all the way out and all the way in, grinding against Nathan's prostate on each pass. His hand never left Nathan's cock, moving it in time with his pounding hips.

Nathan couldn't have muffled his moans now even if he wanted to. He was so glad he didn't share a wall with his neighbors. His body was a live wire, every nerve ending filled and snapping with pleasure like he'd never known. He felt like he was going to explode with it. Without Storm's weight on top of him he was certain he would've vibrated right off the bed. He tried to meet Storm's thrusts, but his muscles didn't want to obey. He was out of control, made into a puddle by the stubborn demon fucking into him with determination, like keeping Nathan like this was his primary objective in life.

"Please, Storm, please," he sobbed. He couldn't take much more. His body burned from within. His sac was tight, his cock heavy. "Mercy!"

Storm's thumb passed over the slit of his cock, and everything whited out. A scream tore from his throat, his body spasming. Strong hands gripped him tight, Storm's thick cock spearing into him a handful more times before going still, grinding deep as liquid heat filled him up.

He didn't realize little whines were spilling from him until Storm kissed him quiet, rocking his hips gently, like he wasn't ready to be done despite the fact they'd both

already come.

“Shh, I’ve got you, sunshine,” Storm crooned against his panting mouth.

Nathan’s body quivered with aftershocks. He didn’t think he’d ever come so hard in his life . He clung to Storm’s body, hooking his ankles behind his lower back and digging his fingers into the rounded muscle of his shoulders. Storm weathered it all, kissing him softly until Nathan stopped feeling like he was an exposed wire, arcing with electricity and out of control.

Regret would find him soon. This was a monumentally stupid thing to do. But lips on his own pulled him from his thoughts. He groaned weakly as Storm pulled out. Soreness in his inner thighs was already setting in, but it was an afterthought as he rolled with Storm, following his mouth. Storm’s arms were warm and tight around him, and when he finally pulled away to breathe, he rested his head on Storm’s broad, fuzzy chest.

“Don’t start thinking yet, sunshine,” Storm said, his voice low and soothing. “Don’t borrow tomorrow’s trouble. Just rest.”

Tomorrow’s trouble. Yes, he had no doubt this would be a mess, but Storm was right. It was a mess he could face tomorrow.

* * *

When Nathan woke, Storm was gone, and he tried to ignore the way his stomach dropped with disappointment. The space beside him had long ago grown cold, and he stretched out a hand, mulling over his complicated feelings. Midmorning sunlight streamed in through the slats of his window blinds. He rolled onto his back, wondering when Storm snuck out—and how he managed it without waking him. The last thing he remembered was being sprawled on top of him. Somehow Storm had not

only slipped away but worked the blankets out from under him to cover him up. He was still naked, and gloriously sore. His body was satisfied, bone-deep, in a way he'd never felt before. It was the best sex of his life. Anxiety twisted in him like a coiled serpent at the thought of what they'd done, but he couldn't deny how much he enjoyed it.

That made it all the more dangerous. He couldn't do this again. He'd had a grievous lapse in judgment, and he could not become the next Alex or Luke. Something about Storm got under his skin, but... this couldn't happen again. It was good that Storm had slipped out during the night. At least Nathan wouldn't have to shoo him away or find a way to break things off. This could be a one time thing, and he could move on. The guild never had to learn about it, and he could carry on trying to build the truce between the two groups.

He would just avoid him. He knew how to contact the humans in their outfit now. There was no need to go through Storm anymore.

With a groan, he rolled out of bed and stood. His thighs and ass were sore but not in a debilitating way. In a wonderful, distracting way. Every time he walked, sat, or moved today, he would be reminded of what he'd done. And there was no one he could confess to. Even if he went for a confession at the church, the risk that Father Hawley would relay the information to Sloan was too great. No, he had to keep this to himself.

That wasn't entirely true. There were others who'd been in his position before, weren't there? Alex and Luke, even Ira, though he'd never been a fighter.

Ira. Maybe speaking with the level-headed prophet would help him sort out his thoughts.

But first, a shower.

He was mortified to realize there was dried cum between his legs. He turned the hot water up and told himself that was why his face was hot as he cleaned himself thoroughly and tried not to think about how good it had felt when Storm filled him up. When that didn't work, he pressed his hot forehead to the cold tile and coached himself on letting it go. It didn't matter how good it felt. It couldn't happen again. It wouldn't happen again. He would be excommunicated or killed for what they'd done last night, and all his efforts to create a truce would be wasted.

He dressed in clean jeans and a T-shirt, then ventured to the kitchen.

There was a post-it on the coffeemaker. He cast a glance through the living room, but it was empty. Nothing was out of place. Hell, even the lock on the doorknob was turned. Storm locked up when he snuck out. That was nice, he supposed.

Coffee's ready. Just hit the button, the post-it read, with a little zigzag thing at the bottom—was that a lightning bolt? Storm signed his name with a lightning bolt. That was adorable.

“No, it's not, dammit,” he said aloud, opening the coffeemaker's lid. As promised, it was already filled with fresh grounds, and the tank was full of water. He pushed the button with a sigh.

While it ran, he fetched his phone from the bedroom and pressed Ira's name. It rang for so long that Nathan began to worry it would go to voicemail.

“ ‘Lo ?”

He took a breath, but paused. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“ Little bit .” There was a soft murmur, and Ira said, “ It's just Nate. Go back to sleep .”

“ Gonna kill ‘em both ,” a deep voice replied, close enough this time for him to overhear.

Both?

“ Hang on, let me go into the next room .”

Nathan waited, watching the coffee trickle into the pot as the sound of a door closing and soft shuffling came through the speaker.

“ Okay. What’s up? ”

“I... I need some advice. I know we aren’t supposed to ask prophets about things, but?—”

“ Don’t worry about that. We’re not exactly abiding by guild rules these days. ”

“Right.” He sighed, passing a hand over his short hair. “I did something stupid.”

“ I don’t know that I’d call Storm stupid . He has his moments, I guess, but ? — ”

“I wasn’t calling him —wait. You already know?”

“ Uh. ”

He desperately wanted to know if Ira had seen them having sex in a vision, but the answer might make him combust into flames. He decided to focus on the problem at hand instead. “What do I do, then? This can’t happen again. Sloan would lose it. They’d kill me!”

“ Do you love him? ”

“Do I love the demon I met two days ago who had sex with me and snuck out while I was sleeping?” He had the grace to look up behind himself and make Nathan’s coffee, which was nice, but sneaking out just made the whole thing feel like a one-night stand. Maybe that was all it was to him. Nathan had to admit that would make things easier, even if it did make something uncomfortable squirm in his belly. That was all it should be, and he was determined to accept that. It wasn’t like they could have anything serious. He couldn’t have a relationship with a demon and be in the guild. They’d all learned by now that that simply wasn’t possible.

“ He snuck out ? Ugh, he is stupid. I’m going to give him so much hell, just wait until tonight. ”

“What?”

“ Nothing. Listen, his stupidity aside: how did it make you feel? ”

“I... I don’t know, man. Good, I guess? The sex was good.” His face flamed, and he regretted calling Ira at all. This was embarrassing. He should’ve just put it in a box and buried it in the back of his head like a good little Christian. “But it’s dangerous. It’s stupid. I should be glad he left this morning without saying anything.”

Ira snorted.

“What? Why are you laughing?”

“ You sound like we did, that’s all .”

Nathan fought the urge to hit something. It would be the coffeemaker, and he couldn’t afford a new one. “I don’t want that!”

“ Then don’t see him again. ”

Like it was so simple. “You guys made him my point of contact.”

“ That was just because Talon was being a dick about letting you near any of the humans. He’s over it now .”

“Oh.” So that was it, then? He didn’t have to talk to Storm again? He could just go around him and do what he needed to do and... forget about it. Forget about how safe he’d made him feel. Forget about Storm’s reassuring warmth as he fell asleep.

“ Is that what you want? ”

It felt like a leading question. He didn’t know how to answer it.

Ira sighed through the line. “ I won’t tell you what to do, Nate. All I’ll tell you is that things will fall into place as they’re meant to. ”

“Is that how you’re so Zen all the time? ‘What will be will be?’” He opened the cabinet over the coffeemaker and grabbed a travel mug.

“ Something like that. When I’m not scared shitless. ”

Nathan snorted. He found it hard to picture Ira as anything other than mysteriously knowing and cool-headed, but he supposed he was still only human.

“ Look, if you don’t want to deal with Storm for a bit, you can call me. You know where the Rink is, and you’re welcome any time. Take all the time you need to figure things out. I know it can be overwhelming when you’re first starting out .”

“First starting out,” he repeated dumbly.

“ With a demon .”

Nathan's head fell back in despair. "I'm not... with a demon. It was one time. It won't happen again."

There was a pause. "Right. Listen, I should go, Wolf is grumping at me. Take all the time you need, okay? And I'll talk to Storm about what a monumental jackass he was."

Nathan opened his mouth to tell him not to bother, because it didn't matter, because he wasn't repeating last night again, because it had been a mistake. But... it didn't matter, right? Nathan wouldn't have to see him again after today. Ira could say whatever he wanted to Storm. Nathan didn't care.

"Sure. Okay, bye." He hung up, feeling discomfited.

He poured his coffee, took a bitter sip, and tried not to flush when he turned toward the door and felt his ass twinge. It didn't matter. He just had to keep telling himself that.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 9

Storm

Storm's phone rang as he was pulling into the parking lot outside the main entrance of the hospital where the morgue was located. He hoped it was Nathan, and a sharp pang of disappointment hit him when he saw Ira's name instead. With a sigh, he parked and answered, glaring at the cheerful sunlight beaming in through his windshield.

"What's up?"

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

Storm blinked, taking the phone from his ear to double-check that the high-pitched voice screeching at him was indeed Ira. "What? What are you talking about? What'd I do?"

"You had sex with Nate and then left before morning? What are you, stupid?"

"Uh, yes I did, and no, I'm not."

"Are you sure? Because that sounds like something an asshole would do, not someone who wants demonic dibs on the nice human."

Storm huffed. "Listen, I didn't think he'd want me there when he woke up. He said he'd never had sex with a man before, so I figured he'd want to have a nice little

freak-out in the morning. It's not like he invited me to spend the night." He'd spent the night anyway, of course, but he'd assumed it would be best to make himself scarce when the sun started to rise.

" Ohhh my God, you're an idiot. He'd never been with—you know what? I can't even do this. Wolf—Wolf, here, take the phone ."

" What? Why? I don't want this. Seidhr? Seidhr, where are you going? " Wolf called, his voice gruff with sleep. A moment later, he said into the phone, " What'd you do? "

"I had sex with Nathan, which was apparently a terrible thing to do." He didn't like the way his stomach curled with unease. Ira was acting like he'd royally fucked up by leaving, but he'd known before Nathan even fell asleep that he was going to have some complicated feelings about what they'd done in the morning. Wasn't it better to let him work through them alone?

" Oh, I see. Yeah, you're a dumbass ," Wolf said.

"What? Why?"

" I don't know, humans are emotional. "

" Wolf, that's not helping! " Ira shouted from somewhere farther away, his voice barely audible.

" Take the phone back, then !"

Storm sighed. "Will someone please just tell me what I did wrong?"

There was a sigh, and then Ira, closer again, said, " He's never slept with a man

before, Storm—and I hate that I now know that about him, because it’s way TMI. The thing to do was not to leave him alone to sort through his complicated and upsetting emotions on his own. The thing to do would’ve been to let him wake up with you, show him how much you still want him, and don’t leave him with any doubt about what you want from him. Right now, he thinks that was a one-night stand that he can’t allow to happen again, and you disappearing before morning only reinforces that. ”

Shit.

“ One night isn’t all you want from him, is it ?” Ira asked pointedly.

“No. Of course not.” He wanted everything. Last night proved exactly how good they could be together. He’d never felt such a sense of rightness with another person before. He hadn’t slept at all last night after Nathan drifted off, just held the man and listened to him breathe, drinking in every moment with him that he could. If he’d known leaving would jeopardize that, he’d have stuck to Nathan’s side like glue. Maybe even cooked him breakfast. Sucked him off before they had to leave for the hospital.

Yeah, that was what he should have done.

“ You’re gonna have a hell of a time convincing him of that now. He’s decided he can’t let it happen again. ”

“Fuck.” He carded his fingers through his hair.

There was a shuffling sound, and then Wolf asked, “ Are you still meeting him at the hospital ?”

“Yeah. I’m waiting in the parking lot now.”

“ Good. There’s your chance to talk to him. And then bring him to the Rink after you get done at the morgue. We all want to know what you find. ”

“ Yes, good idea ,” Ira agreed. “ Above all, be honest. Let him know what you want from him. He’s going to be resistant, though, so be patient with him .”

“ Make him happy ,” Wolf said. “ Focus on doing whatever makes him happy. That’s what the rest of us did. If he’s happy, he won’t want to leave. ”

“ Aww ,” Ira simpered. “ Is it really ?”

“ Yep. Worked, didn’t it? Three times now, according to what the others have said about their methods. ”

“Okay. Make him happy. I can do that.” How hard could it be?

They said their goodbyes, and in the quiet cab of the truck, Storm blew out a breath. He supposed he deserved the dressing down Ira had given him. If Ira heard about it, it meant Nathan reached out to him, and he wouldn’t have reached out if he didn’t care.

Storm hadn’t wanted to leave, but he’d assumed the holy man would need time to come to terms with what they’d done. He’d never been with a man before, never been with a demon before, and Storm worried his presence in the morning might’ve made Nathan shut things down before they even began. He’d expected Nathan to need time to come to terms with how good last night had felt. But maybe giving Nathan that much space was the wrong approach. He’d responded very well to a firm hand the few times Storm had used one. Maybe he needed to be a little pushy.

He decided to send a text, just to feel Nathan out.

I’ve been told I’m an ass for leaving. I wasn’t sure you’d want me there when you

woke up.

He left the truck and went to wait near the front entrance, just to be certain he wouldn't miss Nathan's arrival. While he waited in the shade of the awning, he lit a cigarette. The familiar rush of nicotine calmed his anxious mind. He smoked all of it and lit a second one waiting for Nathan to arrive. Soon enough, he saw a familiar gray sedan pulling into the parking lot, and anticipation sparked down his spine as it passed him and found a parking spot a couple of aisles over from Storm's truck.

Their eyes met through the windshield, and Storm flashed back to last night. The heat of Nathan's body squeezing his cock, their eyes locked, Nathan's chest expanding with rapid pants and his quivering thighs flanking Storm's sides. Goddamn, it was perfect. Storm had been around for centuries, had had hundreds of sex partners, but no one else compared. Nathan ruined him for anyone else. No one else would do.

Nathan squared his shoulders before he emerged from the car, and Storm fought down a smile. He was as brave as he was beautiful, his human.

A lesser man might've strode past Storm and into the building to get on with the job, but Nathan came to a stop in front of him, waiting.

"You didn't text me back," Storm said.

Something hot flashed in Nathan's otherwise cool gaze. He was angry. That was good. It meant he cared enough to be offended. "You didn't stick around."

Storm lowered his gaze. "I thought you might've wanted to have a private freak-out."

Nathan crossed his arms, shaking himself. "You know what? It's okay. It's better that you left, really. We should leave things as they are. We had a fun night. It doesn't need to be more than that."

Storm scowled. The fuck it didn't. He opened his mouth to say exactly that, but Nathan continued doggedly.

"I have to go inside and look at this body. That has to be my priority right now. If you can let me focus on my job, you can come. If you're going to press the issue, you can wait out here, and I'll call Ira to send another —" he paused, glancing around to make sure no one could overhear them, "—demon here to help me."

Storm's jaw ticked, and he folded his arms. He didn't want another demon coming here and helping Nathan. He was the one Nathan should turn to for help.

The stubborn set of Nathan's jaw suggested that pushing him right now would just get him ejected from the morgue visit altogether, and being sent away would make it that much harder to get back in Nathan's good graces. This wasn't his Nate, his submissive ray of sunshine. This was Captain Accardi on a mission. After they saw the body, he'd have his chance to speak his mind. He could be patient.

"Okay," he agreed, unfolding his arms and inclining his head. "Let's focus on the job. Ira's requested you come to the Rink when we're done here to give them an update on what we find."

He wasn't giving up, but he could play by Nathan's rules for now.

Chapter 10

Nathan

Nathan had completely forgotten about his plan to meet Storm at the hospital until he was getting in the car and thinking ahead to the meeting with the coroner. His thoughts had ground to a screeching halt when he was backing out of his driveway and realized that he couldn't put Storm from his mind and focus on the mission, because Storm was a part of his mission that morning.

He'd considered calling Ira again to beg for a different demon. But he'd already embarrassed himself to the prophet enough for one day. He could suck it up long enough to get the job done and then wipe his hands of Storm and his strange allure.

They fell into step together through the automatic glass doors and into the sprawling entrance of the hospital. Nathan walked right past the registration desk and the bustling lobby to a set of four elevators waiting in a row, their silver doors gleaming. He hit one of the buttons pointing down, noticing as he stepped back that Storm was eyeing him curiously.

"I've met with the doctor in this lab before, so just let me do the talking," he said stiffly.

"Whatever you say, Cap."

Nathan glared at Storm's cheerful grin. He ignored the brief flare of disappointment he felt when Storm didn't call him 'sunshine.' It would be a good thing if he

abandoned that distracting nickname. He wanted distance from last night. He should be glad Storm was giving it to him by agreeing to be professional here.

It was his own damn fault he wanted to lean in and lay his head on Storm's strong shoulder. He'd just have to learn to ignore these feelings.

The elevator doors opened with a pleasant ding , and Nathan realized he'd been staring. Storm's crimson eyes were soft, like he was already imagining Nathan in his arms.

"Just come on," he said wearily, trudging inside. He was frustrated with Storm, frustrated with himself. Why couldn't things just be easy? He was trying to do the right thing by brokering this truce. Why did it feel like he was being punished?

He didn't glance over, but his body warmed with awareness as Storm stepped in beside him. The elevator wasn't big enough for both of them. Or Storm was just big . If he punched the button a little harder than necessary, that was the button's problem.

"You're angry," Storm said quietly.

He blew out a breath. "No." It sounded plaintive to his own ears.

Silence followed, and when he dared to glance over, he found Storm studying him doubtfully.

Yeah, okay, maybe he was a little angry, but he didn't want to be. He didn't want to care at all, but he did . Last night had been incredible, and this morning was a gut punch for multiple reasons. He'd woken alone and spiraled all morning about what it meant and whether he wanted it to mean anything at all. The truth was, he did want it to mean something. Otherwise, he'd endangered everything for nothing. But it couldn't mean anything, because it would endanger everything . And around and

around he went.

Their shoulders brushed, and Nathan held his breath. He released it only when the door opened with another cheerful sound, rushing from the claustrophobic space and out into the narrow hallway. This area of the hospital wasn't as open and friendly as the upper levels, because very few patients found their way down here. Nathan trekked the familiar path through the maze-like, painted brick halls to a familiar office. The door was open, with a nameplate that read Doctor Glinda Taylor, M.D.

Nathan knocked on the open door.

The woman behind the desk was short and matronly, with silver hair tied up in a neat bun. Her computer screen reflected in her large glasses, and she smiled weakly when she saw Nathan.

"Ah, Mister Accardi. I was told I could expect one of you today."

"It's good to see you, Glinda. How's the family?"

The smile was more genuine this time. "They're good. My daughter's pregnant with her second." She puffed up with pride.

Nathan gasped gleefully. "No, is she really? She just had the first one not long ago."

"Almost two years ago now."

"What? No way. God, I'm getting old." Two years ago, he'd come by to speak with Glinda—a long-time friend of Dr. Maxwell, who was the guild's resident physician—about a case where a woman had been murdered by a crex demon. Glinda had spent most of that visit, when they weren't talking about the strange claw marks on the woman's body, talking about her daughter's pregnancy and how excited she

was to become a grandmother.

Glinda laughed brightly and stood. She was a head shorter than Nathan, dwarfed entirely by Storm, who loomed over Nathan's shoulder. "You and me both, my friend. I take it you want to see the body?"

Right. Back to business. "Yes, if you can swing it. Do you mind if my friend joins us? He's here for a group similar to mine."

Glinda brightened. "Really? That's great news. Your guild has been doing this alone for a long time. Having more fighters on the good team will probably take a load off, right? Right this way." Nathan backed into Storm's incredible heat to let Glinda pass, and when big fingers brushed his hip, a shiver tore down his spine.

He practically sprang away, falling into step behind Glinda before his body could get any crazy ideas about leaning into that touch.

"You'd think," he said belatedly. Glinda knew only bare bones about what the guild really did—just enough to call them for help if she found anything strange during her own work.

"I should warn you," Glinda said as she led them down the hall, "it's not pretty."

"Are dead bodies ever pretty?"

Glinda snorted. "Well, no. But some are worse than others. This one is one of the worst I've seen. Poor kid."

"I saw the CCTV footage. It was rough."

Glinda clucked her tongue. "I only saw the aftermath, but that was bad enough. They

gathered what they could from the crime scene and bagged it. The bag is—well, in the boy's chest cavity. I've already done the autopsy and logged everything."

"Any strange findings?" Nathan asked as she opened a door and led them into the morgue. There was a row of mortuary cabinets on the wall, gleaming in the pale fluorescent lights. An empty metal table stood in the center of the room, and a metal grate sat grimly beneath it.

"Besides the obvious? Of course," Glinda said, going around the exam table and to the cabinets on the far wall. "I ran a tox screen. Amphetamines and benzodiazepines were both present in his system at the time of death."

"He was a college student, right?" Nathan asked. "Experimentation with drugs isn't that weird. I mean, those are kind of a no-no to mix."

"No, you're right. That wasn't the weirdest thing. I surveyed the contents of his stomach after the abnormal tox screen. There were traces of human bone there. And it wasn't his own."

Nathan's head swirled. He shook himself. "What?"

Glinda nodded gravely. "That's exactly what I said. What finally made me call your leader was when I found traces of sulfur mixed with the bone."

Nathan looked at Storm, forgetting all his tangled feelings in the face of his confusion.

"Sometimes possessions can result in traces of sulfur being found in the bloodstream," Storm said. "I've never heard of it being in someone's stomach."

"Could it have... wound up there during the death? It was rather violent." He glanced

between both Glinda and Storm.

“It was, and I considered that, but the stomach was intact,” Glinda said. “All of the trauma was located higher, in the chest cavity, but his lower abdominal organs—mostly everything below the diaphragm—were all undamaged. I found the bone and sulfur right next to what I think was a McChicken.”

Bile rose in Nathan’s throat, and he swallowed hard.

Glinda cast him a weary smile. “Sorry. Gallows humor. You’ve got to have it to survive a job like this. Shall I open it up or no? I don’t want you to hurl.”

They both looked at him , and Nathan squared his shoulders. This was his job; just because Storm was here with him this time didn’t mean he could be any less than a captain of the guild should be. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.” Sloan would probably take him off the case if he failed to inspect the body himself, and he didn’t want this going to anyone else.

Glinda opened the cabinet, and Nathan stepped back as she slid the body out. It was blessedly covered in a sheet, and Nathan averted his eyes as she drew it back.

“ God damn,” Storm murmured, and Nathan braced his hands on his hips, unable to bring himself to look.

He’d killed hundreds of monsters. He’d seen men and women take grievous injuries—had taken a few of his own, at that. This wasn’t his first dead body. Hell, the pentagram killer case had probably been just as gory as this boy’s death, if not more. Why was this one different from all the others?

Was it because Storm was with him this time? With his squad, he was the leader, the captain. He was in charge and expected to be the strongest and steadiest. But Storm

had put a crack in his mask, and he couldn't hide anymore. He'd been wrong-footed since last night, and what once was rote now felt brand new. He was facing the world like a raw nerve now, exposed and aching with every experience.

"Nate." A strong hand touched his shoulder. Storm's thumb brushed the bare skin just past his collar, and he was too weak to resist drifting a step closer. "It's okay."

Nathan nodded. Bracing himself, he looked at the body.

His chest cavity gaped open, and a white, plastic sack sat inside it. His spine was intact and visible. Part of Nathan wondered who the poor, unfortunate soul was who was responsible for gathering all the pieces from the scene of the... crime? It felt like a crime. An unnatural crime against humanity itself. He'd seen exorcisms of possessor demons on tape during his schooling at the guild, but he'd never seen a live one before. They weren't supposed to be like this. They could control the host, yes, and do terrible things, but they couldn't do this. They couldn't punch their way out of an innocent boy. This wasn't right.

Dried blood was dotted on the boy's neck and face. A droplet of it had landed in the corner of his eye.

"Smells like sulfur," Storm murmured.

Nathan couldn't smell it, but he wasn't a demon. Glinda glanced over at them but didn't ask.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to make sense of anything I see here," Nathan admitted. "I can barely tell which... chunk used to go where." He was certain his face was an interesting shade of green right now.

"That is a dilemma," Storm said. He cast about for something and reached for a box

of latex gloves with an askance look at Glinda.

“Oh, yes, by all means,” she said. “I can remove this bag if you need.”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

Oh, God, Nathan thought. He didn’t want to see Storm stick his hand in there. But he was snapping on a glove, and Glinda was doing the same, removing the bag and setting it farther down, on the body’s legs.

Storm leaned closer, tugging the ribcage up and tilting his head to look underneath it. “There’s something under here. Come here and look at this, Nate.”

“Mary, mother of Christ, give me the strength not to hurl all over Storm and the body, please and thank you, amen.”

Storm shot him a sardonic look. “Hilarious.”

“I’m not joking at all.” Reluctantly, he sidled closer and peered at whatever Storm was looking at. Streaks on the underside of the bones. “Are those... claw marks?”

“Mm-hm.” Storm straightened, snapping his glove off and tossing it into the garbage can nearby. “That demon tried to claw its way out of him. I’m thinking the body died before the demon could gain a foothold. Which,” he looked dubious, “might be a good thing. It means there’s at least one way to stop the possessor from getting out. It needs a living host to escape.”

“But... why?” Nathan asked. That knowledge was useful, maybe, but he didn’t like the implication. He didn’t want to kill a human to stop a demon. That wasn’t a trade he was willing to make. The innocent life should always come first.

Storm shook his head. “I can’t say for sure. I think we should head back to the Rink. Some of the others have been around longer than me. I’d like to get their opinions first.”

“Sure, yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Maybe the fresh air would help him clear his head—and control his stomach.

Glinda cleaned up quickly, covering the body and returning it to the cabinet. They walked out together, and Nathan felt like he could breathe easier when she closed the door behind them, hiding the room from view.

“Thank you for your help, Doctor Taylor,” he said, offering his hand.

“Of course, of course,” Glinda said, shaking firmly. “I just hope you find out what happened to this poor boy and make sure it doesn’t happen to anyone else. I can’t imagine what he went through in his final moments.”

Nor could Nathan.

He led Storm back to the elevator, but a piece of his mind remained behind in the morgue. Could that happen to others? Would it, if they didn’t solve this quickly enough? Or was it one overzealous possessor hungry enough for freedom that it attempted something drastic and impossible? He barely noticed Storm pressing the button for the elevator, stepping in automatically when it arrived.

His stomach roiled, and he curled his arms tightly around his middle, staring absently down at the floor. The elevator started to move—and then jolted to a stop. He raised his head to find Storm’s fingers falling away from the emergency stop button.

“What—”

“Shut up and come here. You’re pale and you need this.”

Storm didn’t give him time to form a response, pulling Nathan against him and hugging him tightly. His first instinct was to rebel, but the warm firmness of Storm’s body was too comforting to resist. He splayed his hands against Storm’s muscular back and turned his head, tucking it in the curve of Storm’s neck. He dragged the scent of tobacco and leather and soap deep into his lungs, washing away the stark memory of the body. The scent threw him right back to last night, and with his eyes closed, he could almost imagine they were back in his house.

He wouldn’t be like this with his squad. Why couldn’t he be strong with Storm? Why did he fold so easily?

“Why do you make me weak?” he asked while his face was safely hidden.

“Because I can handle being the strong one when we’re together.”

“I... I have to be strong.” It came out far whinier than he intended.

“You are.” Storm’s voice was calm and reassuring. One big hand swept up and down Nathan’s back, melting him in slow, sure strokes. “But you’re not Atlas. You can’t hold the world on your shoulders forever. Sometimes it’s okay to relieve yourself of it.”

“Is that what this is?” Was it a relief or a punishment? He couldn’t tell.

“I hope so. I want to help you carry that weight. I want you to let me.” Strong fingers carded with infinite softness through Nathan’s hair, and a warm kiss was pressed to his temple. “There’s a camera in here, so I should turn the elevator back on.”

“Right.” As though the weight on his shoulders was a physical thing, his body shook

at the effort it took to pull away. He wanted to keep his gaze averted, but Storm wasn't having it. Hands cupped his face, guiding his eyes up.

Storm smiled, pleased. "You've got some color back." He reached over without looking and pushed the emergency stop. The elevator shuddered and began to rise, and Storm stroked Nathan's cheek with his thumb all the while.

* * *

Stepping outside, the sunlight and warm breeze swept away the last remnants of the morgue below, leaving Nathan feeling somewhat lighter. He still had the complicated issue of his relationship with Storm to contend with, but that felt inconsequential after staring at the mauled body hiding below the hospital. He could still feel Storm's arms around him, his fingers in his hair.

Nathan didn't want to be weak. He didn't like it. As a squad captain, he was responsible for the people in his charge. Weakness would get someone killed. It didn't matter that they weren't with him at the moment. He had to get it together so he could continue to be what his people needed. Letting his emotions rule him was dangerous.

He didn't notice Storm following him until he reached his car and Storm let himself into the passenger seat.

"What—What are you doing?" he asked.

"Going with you to the Rink. I can come back for my truck later. We need to talk."

Nathan scowled, searching for the anger he'd felt before he reached the hospital. "I don't want to talk. I told you. Last night can't mean anything. We had our fun?—"

“Last night wasn’t just fun .” He spat the word like it was a deeply personal insult. “Don’t mistake my leaving this morning as some sort of sign that I was done with you.”

“It doesn’t?—”

“It does matter. Don’t you fucking tell me it doesn’t. You felt it last night, too. I know you did.”

Nathan’s face was on fire. He started the car and backed out of the parking spot. If they were going to argue about this, he was going to be doing his job along the way.

“If Sloan finds out what happened, he’ll kill me. Probably literally. Don’t you understand? I’m working so hard to secure a truce between the guild and your people. If I screw this up, people could die. And if Sloan thinks I’m compromised because I had sex with you, he won’t entertain the truce anymore. I can’t let that happen. People will get hurt, and it’ll be because I wasn’t strong enough to control myself.” His grip was painfully tight on the steering wheel, but he couldn’t seem to make himself relax.

Storm sighed. “Do you really think he’s entertaining the truce anyway?”

Nathan faltered. He didn’t want to admit it, but his last interaction with Sloan had left a sour taste in his mouth. “I hope so. Even if he has an agenda of some kind, the fact that he’s letting me try means I have a chance to show him that things can be different. I need to at least try to win him over, for all our sakes. That’ll take time and careful, strategic steps. Sleeping with a halfling didn’t factor into my plans at all.”

“As I understand, it rarely does.”

Nathan’s mouth twitched against his will, and Storm’s beaming smile made him feel

very much like he'd just lost this whole argument.

"You can be stubborn about it for now," Storm agreed, if reluctantly. "But just so you know, I'm not giving up. And eventually I'll lose my patience." It might've sounded threatening to anyone else, but Nathan didn't feel intimidated. He didn't think that was Storm's intention, anyway.

"What happens then?" he asked curiously.

Storm shrugged lightly. "I don't know. Tie you up until you admit you want me, too, maybe."

Heat licked up and down Nathan's spine at the thought, and he was certain his face flushed. If last night was intense, how much better would it feel to be tied up, completely at Storm's mercy?

He shook himself. "You can't force me to do what you want me to do," Nathan said.

"I don't want to force you at all, sunshine, about anything. There's a difference between forcing you to do something and getting you to admit you wanted to do it all along." He paused, his gaze steady and confident on the side of Nathan's face. "You want me. You just aren't ready to admit you want me. That's okay."

Nathan ignored the curl of warmth at the return of the 'sunshine' endearment.

They drove in silence for a while after that. Driving was comfortingly familiar. The motions, the mental focus. Storm was quiet in the passenger seat, his aviators covering his eyes and the car's visor pulled down. He shielded his eyes with his hands, also, and Nathan wondered how much the sun truly bothered him. Part of him wanted to ask, but he was afraid talking in any way would wind up making him lose more ground in this strange tug of war.

Halfway to the Rink, Storm pointed at a building on the side of the road.

“Stop there, let’s grab coffee.”

Coffee sounded great. He could use the warmth and the caffeine, but when he pulled into the parking lot, he realized there was no drive-thru window.

“No worries. I know what you like. I’ll run in and get it. You just wait here,” Storm said, so Nathan parked and let him go.

He stared despondently out the window. There was a concrete drainage ditch beyond the parking lot, protected by a rusted chain-link fence. It had rained just a few days ago, but he couldn’t see the water from here. Scraggly bushes grew on the other side of it, obscuring the next parking lot from view.

Would that he could turn his brain off for a while. Between plaintive thoughts about the unfairness of his situation with Storm, he saw the body. The dark cavity of the boy’s chest, the streaks of old blood on the plastic bag, the ashen gray color of his skin. They had to learn what had caused it. How had he become possessed? Could it happen to anyone? A shudder rolled down his spine at the thought of that happening to someone he cared about. The horror that poor kid must’ve felt just before he died, having no idea what was happening to him.

The car door opened, startling him from his miserable spiral. Coffee and leather filled the car as Storm sat down, handing him a cardboard cup. It smelled... incredible .

“What is this?” he asked, sniffing it. Sweet, creamy, and steaming hot.

“White chocolate mocha. You could use the sugar and fat. It’ll help. Just drink it.”

He’d never ordered anything like this in his life. It always seemed too self-indulgent.

But Storm was right. Maybe it would help clear the cobwebs from his mind and settle his stomach.

He took a sip as he backed out of the parking spot, and it took all he had not to moan at the taste. At the risk of scalding his tongue, he took another, larger sip. The coffee cup never left his hand as he drove toward the Rink.

Maybe indulging sometimes wasn't so bad.

Chapter 11

Storm

Storm was downright smug with satisfaction. Nathan liked the coffee so much he didn't put it down until it was empty, and he seemed to perk up as he drank it. He didn't know why the man denied himself these little pleasures, but Storm intended to give them to him. Coffee was just the beginning.

The others were all at the Rink when they arrived. Nathan blew out a breath as they emerged from the car, and Storm rounded it, lighting a cigarette and tugging Nathan to a halt when he tried to move toward the building.

“What?” he asked impatiently, glancing between the Rink and Storm.

“Wait for me.”

Nathan shot him a frown. “Don't smoke,” he said pointedly.

Storm leveled an exasperated look at him. “Just wait.”

Nathan huffed, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Why?”

“Because you could use the fresh air.”

Nathan blew out a breath, shifting from foot to foot—but he didn't walk away. Storm considered it a win, especially when Nathan turned and leaned against the warm grill

of the car. He checked to make sure his smoke was going downwind and settled beside him, leaning just close enough for their shoulders to brush and smiling to himself when he heard Nathan's quiet intake of breath.

"Feeling better?" he asked softly, studying Nathan's stubbled jaw.

Nathan inhaled deeply. "Yeah. I think so."

Storm could barely take his eyes off the human beside him, but he didn't like that his presence had upset him so. Would Nathan have handled the morgue visit better if someone else had been with him? One of the other demons or even one of his own squad members from the guild?

With a sigh, he felt compelled to say, "I'm sorry."

Nathan looked at him with surprise. "What? Why?"

"You said... I make you weak. If my presence at the morgue made things harder for you... I'm sorry." The words felt strange on his tongue. He wasn't prone to apologies or caring what anyone thought, but he didn't want to be the reason Nathan felt unmoored. Not like that, anyway.

Nathan was quiet for a moment, and Storm sucked almost desperately at his cigarette, needing something to occupy him so he didn't start fidgeting.

"It's not your fault," he finally said. "I'm glad you were there."

Storm found that hard to believe. "Glad? Really?"

Nathan winced. "Maybe not glad." He smiled crookedly to take the sting from the admission. "Not at first, anyway. But later, in the elevator." He scuffed his boot on

the pavement. “I would’ve felt all the same things even if you weren’t there. Maybe I would’ve been able to hide it better if I’d been with someone else, but... yeah, you were right. It might not be a bad thing to let someone else be the strong one every now and then.”

Satisfaction warmed Storm from within. This was progress, wasn’t it?

Nathan bumped their shoulders together. “Don’t look so smug.” His tone was light and teasing. Another good sign, in Storm’s opinion.

He sputtered out a laugh. “Smug? This isn’t smug.”

“What is it, then?” Nathan asked.

“I’m just... happy you trusted me that much.” He didn’t often feel this unusual heat, and it took him a moment to recognize it as embarrassment. “I hope you know you can always trust me. I’ll always keep you safe.”

The easy humor faded from Nathan’s gaze. His eyes were wide and vulnerable, and Storm resisted the urge to reach for him. Things between them were still too precarious to risk setting his progress back with an ill-timed push for more. He needed to be patient.

With a bashful smile, Nathan looked away and straightened. “I need to go inside and update the others. Are you coming?” He flushed abruptly. “In, I mean? Are you coming inside—to the meeting?”

Storm struggled hard to hide his smile. “Yeah. Lead the way, sunshine.”

Nathan’s throat bobbed. God, Storm couldn’t wait until he was allowed to touch him again.

Inside the Rink, the demons were hovering around the snack bar with bottles of beer, Shadrach and Xyra included this time. The humans were in the training area. Angela, Zachary, and Ira were in the center, striking different attack and defense poses when Luke called them out. Alex was pacing around them, correcting their forms and giving encouragement.

“Hold up!” Alex called when he spotted Storm and Nathan, and they all came over. “You’re back. How’d it go?”

Nathan glanced at him, his eyes filled with anxiety, and before he could think better of it, Storm opened his mouth and started speaking. The tension bled from Nathan’s body, like Storm had relieved him of yet another burden, and happiness bubbled up in Storm’s chest. He gave them a rundown of what they saw from the body and what the doctor told them. The bone fragments and sulfur in the stomach were the oddest thing, but the claw marks on the inside of the chest cavity and ribs weren’t exactly cheerful news, either.

“So a possessor demon tried to claw its way out of that guy?” Malachi asked, leaning against the snack bar.

“Gross,” Angela declared, dragging herself up to sit on the half-wall. “Is this what you guys talk about when we’re at school?”

“Among other things,” Malachi said with a cheeky wink, and Angela shook her head with a grin.

“Frankly, I’m baffled,” Nathan said, flapping his hands. “None of it makes any sense.”

“How do possessors normally find a host?” Alex asked, glancing around at the demons for an answer. “Like, how did it even get in the guy in the first place?”

“Well, most often, it’s someone who invites the demon in, either intentionally or accidentally,” Talon said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “If you’re thinking this boy was targeted somehow, it could be that someone planted a hex bag on or near him.”

Beside him, Shadrach pointed at him, nodding his head.

“A hex bag?” Luke asked.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Storm said. “A bag filled with magical ingredients to hex someone.” A realization hit him. “Bone fragments and sulfur would both be found in a hex bag.”

Talon nodded.

Nathan’s face twisted in confusion. “You’re saying this guy ate a hex bag? I mean, I’m no expert, but I doubt that’s something he’d consume accidentally.”

“Amphetamines and benzodiazepines,” Storm said thoughtfully. “The doc said he had drugs in his system.”

“You think it could’ve been a... drug of some kind?” Zachary asked, leaning on the wall by his sister.

“Is that possible?” Nathan asked. “Could someone have fit the contents of a hex bag into a... pill capsule or something for this guy to swallow, thinking it was a drug?”

“If something like that exists, it’s new,” Talon said. “I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

“Nor have I,” Wolf chimed in, and one by one the rest of the demons agreed.

Nathan breathed out a sigh. “I’ll report back to Sloan, see what he wants my next step to be. I could maybe contact the family. They might be able to tell me if this kid had a drug problem.”

“Let us know,” Luke said. “This sounds like a problem for all of us, and I know I’ll sleep better if we’re all working to find a solution.”

“Of course,” Nathan replied. “I came here because I knew it would benefit all of us for you guys to be aware of whatever is happening.”

“And Sloan?” Malachi asked coolly.

“Eh.” Nathan tipped his head to one side with a grimace. “I’ll tell him I had someone with me when I went to the morgue.” His eyes flashed toward Storm. “Hopefully he takes it as a sign that a truce would hold between our groups.” His cheeks darkened, and he abruptly averted his gaze from Storm’s. “I, uh—I should probably get going, actually. The sooner I give my report, the sooner we can figure out our next move.”

No, Storm thought as the others bade him farewell and Nathan turned to go, his pretty, quartz gray eyes moving across Storm like he was afraid of being caught looking.

Storm moved without thinking, following Nathan outside.

“Nate, wait.”

Nathan turned—but he didn’t stop, walking backwards toward his car. “I really do need to go to HQ and give my report about my findings.”

“Can I see you tonight?” he asked, desperate to hold on to this strange connection between them.

Nathan stopped beside his car, wearing an uncertain frown. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Come on,” Storm cajoled. “This wasn’t just one night. I know you felt what I felt.”

Nathan sighed heavily, his shoulders dropping. “Maybe I did, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?” He’d fight tooth and nail for this, but he couldn’t fight Nathan’s own reservations.

“I told you. Sloan won’t stand for it. It puts the whole truce in jeopardy.”

Storm shook his head. “I don’t believe anything will come of this truce, sunshine. Do you? Really?”

Nathan’s brow furrowed. “I have to have hope, Storm. I can’t just go through the motions, thinking my actions don’t really matter. I have to try .”

Frustration rushed through him. “I’m not giving you up for some pipe dream that the guild will stop treating us like monsters.” He stepped closer, finally giving in to the need to push . “You’re mine , goddammit, and I won’t give you up for anything.”

Nathan’s eyes widened. “What?” he said on a breath. “What do you mean ‘yours’? What does that mean?”

Storm pressed closer, penning Nathan in the circle of his arms and the driver’s side door. He didn’t seem alarmed to be trapped there, nor did he try to push Storm away. Instead, he tipped his head back, peering up at Storm’s face as though Storm held all the answers and they were only a breath away.

“I honestly thought the others were being dramatic,” Storm confessed, realizing after

the fact that the others in question might be able to hear him from inside the Rink. “I didn’t think their obsession with their humans made any sense. But then I met you. And you’re so perfect. You’re honest and strong and radiant . You’re what sunshine would feel like if it didn’t burn.”

Nathan sucked in a shocked gasp. Their bodies lined up, and Nathan’s hands fell to his waist, gripping tightly but otherwise unmoving.

“You’re mine. I can feel it. I know you can, too.”

“This can’t happen,” Nathan breathed. “It’s dangerous.”

“All the best things in life are,” Storm countered. He stole in for a kiss, and Nathan didn’t rebuff him. He kept it light, a quick brushing of lips. “Tell me you feel nothing for me, and I’ll back off. Tell me you don’t feel it. Tell me last night meant nothing to you.”

Nathan closed his eyes, his face twisting.

“Tell me,” he ordered, his voice low.

Nathan didn’t respond. His hands fisted in Storm’s shirt.

“Kiss me.” Another order, this one nearly lost on the sun-warmed breeze.

Nathan closed the space between them, tipping his face back and sealing their mouths together. Storm caught the back of his head in one hand, holding firm as he guided Nathan’s mouth open, tangling their tongues together and tasting the remnants of the white chocolate mocha he’d devoured. Nathan’s arms twined around his back, and Storm uttered a rumbling, inhuman growl that had Nathan’s grip tightening in response.

All too soon, Nathan pulled away. “This doesn’t change anything?—”

“Shut up and kiss me again.”

And Nathan obeyed, reeling Storm in and opening for him right away, letting Storm lick into his mouth and meeting his tongue with his own eager one. Their hips lined up, and when Storm felt Nathan’s hard length in his jeans, heat seared straight down his spine.

“ Are they about to fuck in the parking lot? ” Malachi asked from inside the Rink. “ I was going to take Luke for lunch .”

“ If they’re doing that in the parking lot, we’re staying in here ,” Luke declared. “ I don’t want to see that .”

Storm didn’t want to share this side of Nathan with anyone, so with great reluctance, he parted from Nathan, slowing their kisses to light pecks and finally opening his eyes. Nathan’s were still closed, his brow furrowed adorably.

When he finally opened his eyes, they were filled with regret. “This can’t change anything.”

Storm sighed.

“You’re right, I do feel... something. I don’t know what it is. But my job has to come first. The truce has to come first. If it all goes up in smoke later, so be it. At least then I’ll know I gave it my best shot.”

Nathan would keep trying to change the guild from within until it bit him in the ass. Storm would just have to be there to make sure he came out the other side unharmed.

“Okay, sunshine,” Storm agreed, brushing Nathan’s bottom lip with his thumb, and Nathan’s gaze went heavy-lidded with want. “I’m not going to disappear, though. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect you, even from your own nobility.”

His silver eyes sharpened. “I don’t need protection from myself .”

“Debatable,” Storm said, tugging Nathan away from the car so he could open the door for him. “Go on. Give your report, go on your patrol, do your noble warrior thing. I’ll see you later.”

Giving him one last suspicious look, Nathan got in the car and drove away.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 12

Nathan

The drive to HQ seemed to take no time at all, and soon enough he was logging in for the day and making his way to Sloan's office for that report. It was early afternoon now, and HQ was bustling with activity. He passed out various greetings to people as he walked the familiar path.

He braced himself before he knocked, certain that navigating this conversation was going to be just as difficult as last time, if not more so.

The door was closed, which meant Sloan had someone with him. He rapped a knuckle on the door and waited. When it swung open, he was surprised to meet Isaac Morrow's eyes.

Isaac lifted his chin. "Captain Accardi, good to see you."

Nathan smiled. "Paladin Morrow. Hope life is treating you well."

"Well enough. Your turn." He slapped Nathan on the shoulder as he passed, his green eyes twinkling like sunlight through a tree canopy.

Nathan slipped inside and shut the door on Isaac's retreating back.

Commander Sloan was seated at his desk, closing a file folder and tucking it in a drawer as he gestured for Nathan to take a seat across from him. The room was quiet

save for the soft hum of his computer and the barely audible ticking of the clock on the wall beside them.

“Good morning, Commander,” he said as he sat.

Sloan leaned back with a greeting nod. “Good morning. Have you had a chance to go by the morgue? This case has me on pins and needles.”

Nathan did his best not to think about Storm’s arms around his body. It had been much easier at the Rink, because Storm had recognized how uncomfortable Nathan was with the prospect of retelling everything they’d seen. Nathan didn’t have to speak a word; Storm just somehow knew .

He shook himself. Storm wasn’t here, so he had to be strong. “Yes, I did.” He recounted everything he’d learned there, how there were claw marks inside the chest cavity and strange findings in the stomach contents and toxicology report.

“Bone and sulfur? What could that mean?” Sloan asked, sitting back and rubbing a hand along his jaw.

Nathan had rehearsed this part in his head on the drive over. “Well, I spoke to Storm?—”

“Who?” Sloan asked sharply.

“Storm. The halfling that the defectors put me in contact with. I thought they might want to know about whatever this is, so I called him.”

Sloan’s expression smoothed, and Nathan continued quickly. He knew Sloan wouldn’t like this part, but he hoped Storm’s contribution would make him see that working with the defectors and their demons could have its advantages.

“He came by the morgue to take a look, too, actually. He seems to think it’s possible that a hex bag was used to make the victim susceptible to possession. Bone fragments are often used in hex bags, according to him.”

Sloan cut a hand through the air. “Hold on. Why didn’t you take any of your own team with you to the morgue? I assigned this case to you as a captain in the guild. I expected you to involve your squad.”

Nathan faltered. “I’ve been keeping them apprised of the situation, sir, but you gave me permission to seek a truce with them?—”

“Yes, a ceasefire. Not an alliance. Warn them about the boy’s death so they can keep their ears open, certainly, but calling a demon to accompany you on guild business?”

Nathan’s mouth went dry. “I apologize for the misunderstanding, sir.”

Sloan’s gaze was like shards of ice. “Don’t apologize, Captain Accardi. Do better. Remember that you are a paladin, and therefore, your duties to this guild should come first.”

His mind raced. He had to salvage this somehow. He hadn’t expected Sloan to take so much offense at the realization that Nathan had been including the defectors in his investigation.

“But sir, I think they were right about the hex bag.”

Sloan scoffed. “Captain, give me a break. What are you suggesting, that that boy somehow swallowed an entire hex bag?”

“Well, no, but given the other drugs in his system, it’s not impossible to think that he may have ingested something else that acted as a hex bag. A pill capsule, maybe.”

“A pill capsule?” Sloan repeated, looking incredulous. “That’s not possible, Captain. They’re feeding you lies, don’t you see? No, these people are twisting your head around the same way they twisted Hawk and Morgan and Faer, and you’re falling for it. You’re working with this demon like he’s a human. They’ve somehow made you believe that because those demons look human, they actually are human.”

“No, sir, I don’t think that at all?—”

Sloan shook his head. “I’ve heard enough. I’ll consider the hex bag idea and bring it up with the council, but there’s no way any kind of ingestible pill resulted in that boy’s possession.”

Nathan ground his teeth together. “Sir, I think you’re being too hasty. This is a good theory?—”

“A theory that came from them . They’re just trying to twist your head around, and you refuse to see it. The halflings are monsters, and people who abide them are no better.”

“They haven’t hurt anyone!” He didn’t mean to shout, but he couldn’t take this anymore. Why couldn’t Sloan see that he was becoming overwhelmed by his own bitterness? “We’re focusing on the wrong things, Commander.”

Sloan’s cool expression didn’t waver. “Then perhaps you’re the one who’s lost sight of what we’re doing here, Captain.”

Nathan looked down at his feet, threading his fingers together with his elbows on his knees and pursing his lips to keep from arguing more. It wouldn’t get him anywhere. It took everything he had to take a breath, raise his head, and say, “I’ll defer to your judgment in the matter, sir.”

“Yes, you will,” Sloan agreed coldly, and Nathan didn’t miss the threat in his tone. He paused, and Nathan wondered if that would be the end of the meeting until Sloan said, “Your squad is patrolling tonight, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you heard about Shiloh’s team yet?”

“Shiloh’s team, sir?”

Sloan passed a hand over his face. “They were attacked last night while out on patrol. Which wouldn’t be anything noteworthy, as that’s the whole reason we patrol in the first place, but these were... human.”

“Human? Human like the kid in that footage?”

Sloan nodded. “Two humans, both extraordinarily strong. We... We lost Zeke. Maxwell spent all night working on him in surgery.”

A pang of shock hit him. One of these people killed a paladin? “What... What happened? How did they manage to kill one of our people?”

“They were trying to contain the threat without the use of lethal force, because they were human. But they didn’t know how to make them stop fighting. Zeke was trying to hold one of them, and they grabbed one of his knives.”

“They stabbed him with his own knife?” Nathan breathed.

Sloan nodded, then shook his head. “It shouldn’t have happened. We have to figure out what’s causing this. Both of the humans’ chests exploded after Zeke was stabbed. Shiloh said he also saw a skeletal-looking hand reaching through one just before the

human died.”

“So it’s definitely possessor demons trying to break through,” Nathan said. And this incident proved that it was definitely more than just one possessor trying to break free.

“It looks that way, certainly. We need to know why and how to stop this.”

Sloan shouldn’t have dismissed the drug idea so easily, but Nathan couldn’t push the subject any more without risking punishment. The best thing he could do was find the truth, no matter what.

“With your permission, Commander, I’d like to question the demons of In Extremis. There’s a chance someone there knows something, and I think necessity dictates that we utilize all avenues available to us right now.”

Sloan’s face soured. “No, you’re not going anywhere near those demons anymore. They’re clearly hurting your judgment. I’ll send someone else to question the demons of the club. I want you off the case. I’m not sure you’re thinking clearly anymore.”

“But sir,” Nathan protested.

“You need to remember who you’re loyal to, Captain Accardi,” Sloan said.

“I’m loyal to the guild, sir. I never forgot that. It isn’t my fault they made a halfling my point of contact.” He hesitated, then took a calculated risk. “I thought you wanted me to find out where their base is.”

Sloan’s eyes narrowed.

“Give me a little more time with them. I’ve spoken several times with them all, and I

think if I keep at it, they'll invite me to see their operation soon." He felt slimy as he said it.

Sloan tilted his head. He looked tempted. "You have one more week with them, and then I'm pulling the plug on this truce. It's going nowhere, and I won't risk losing any more paladins to them. In the meantime, you're off the possession case. Maybe I'm overloading you, and that's why you're faltering."

Nathan fought to keep his expression passive. He wasn't faltering, and yet he ached with relief that Sloan hadn't shut down the truce completely.

"Fair enough, Commander. I'll do whatever it takes to prove to you that I'm still a loyal member of the guild."

He stood and saluted, ignoring the way his stomach twisted, not at the thought of losing Sloan's trust, but of being unable to see Storm again.

* * *

He spent the rest of the day at HQ, writing up the official report for his morgue visit and training with his squad. At dinner, he made his way to the cafeteria with the others, his mind elsewhere. He probably needed to update the defectors about the attack on Shiloh's squad, if only because it meant this was an ongoing problem like they'd all feared and not an isolated incident.

After getting some food in the buffet line, he found a sun-warmed seat near the stained-glass windows and took his phone from his pocket, creating a new group chat with all the phone numbers he had for the defectors and their demons. Ira, Wolf, Alex, Luke, and Storm.

Hey, this is Nathan. Added all of you I had numbers for to tell you we've seen two

more cases of possessed humans, and we lost a paladin last night to one of them. It looks like the first one wasn't the only.

Luke

Who?

Zeke. Young guy. Sloan said one of the possessed used his own knife against him.

Alex

He was just 19.

Nathan scrubbed a hand through his hair, his stomach twisting. Alex wasn't much older than Zeke. They'd probably crossed paths during their training years. It hadn't been a full year yet since he joined Shiloh's squad.

For some reason, he longed for a response from Storm.

Ira

Do you think the squad was targeted, or was it a random attack?

We don't know, and that's the problem.

Luke

What's Sloan's plan?

Sloan took me off the case. Doesn't like the pill idea. He's putting a different team on the investigation of the footage I showed you.

Wolf

Why not you?

He thinks I'm 'spread too thin.' A punishment for involving you all, I think.

Storm

Fucker.

Nathan bit back a startled laugh. Storm's only contribution so far was indignation on Nathan's behalf. A kernel of warmth settled near his heart at the realization.

It's better this way. I have leave to handle the relationship with you all as I see fit. For now, at least.

He didn't know what would happen in a week when he still had no base of operations to give Sloan—because he wouldn't be revealing the Rink's location to anyone in the guild.

He's going to send paladins to In Extremis at some point, but I'd like to go there and question some people myself.

Alex

An unsanctioned club visit? Naughty Nate.

Nathan snorted out a quiet laugh, muffled behind his hand so he didn't draw any attention to himself.

Sloan doesn't want to pursue the pill theory. Who better to question about demonic

pills than the demonic club scene?

Wolf

That's a pretty good point.

Storm

You're not going alone.

I can take care of myself.

Storm

I know you can, but I'm coming. Besides, if paladins are the target, you could be in danger.

Nathan smiled. It was nice to know he cared.

I'm always in danger.

Storm

Just be careful.

Nathan set his phone down, taking a long drink of his ice water to cool the flush working its way up his neck. He couldn't believe a demon was getting this kind of schoolboy reaction from him. When he'd wrangled his body's stupid reaction, he picked his phone back up.

Always.

When the sun drew long shadows on the ground and the cloak of night chased away the dying rays of light, Nathan met with the rest of his squad in front of the administrative building. The mood was a somber one. News of Zeke's death had spread through the compound like wildfire, uttered in solemn whispers and punctuated with desperate prayers.

Judah, the youngest and newest member of the squad, folded his arms tightly over his chest and broke the heavy silence hanging over the squad. He'd been in Zeke's graduating class, although Nathan didn't know if they were friends or not. "What if we see more of those things tonight?"

Nathan nodded. He'd expected questions. "You were all taught an exorcism, weren't you?"

"An exorcism?" Aidan repeated. "I memorized those rites ten years ago for history class, but there's no way I still remember it well enough to attempt in the field. Possessions are things we read about in textbooks, not actual things we've ever had to deal with before."

The others all gave various agreements—except Judah, who'd taken that history class just last year and probably still remembered the rites better than any of them.

"It's not just a case in a textbook anymore. You all need to run to the library and print off a copy, because we might need it tonight," he said bluntly. "We have reason to believe those people were possessed, and yes, they might not be the only ones out there. We need to be prepared. It's no different than any other monster we've faced, except this time the human life is right there in the middle of the fight. We'll need to be able to hold them down and perform an exorcism. I've stocked the SUVs with extra med-kits and holy water. We can do this. We just have to be ready."

Aidan's face was pallid, but he steeled his spine. "I'll go to the library and print off

copies of the rite for everyone. Give me ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes we can manage,” Nathan said, waving him away. “Thanks for doing it. I’d rather have them and not need them.”

While they waited for Aidan to rejoin them, the rest of them piled into the SUVs and started the engines to let them warm up. It was the tail-end of winter, and the nights were cool this time of year. Judah huddled in the passenger seat, his hands stuffed into the big pocket of his hoodie. Frederic was quiet in the backseat, and a few minutes later, the door behind Nathan opened to admit Aidan.

“I passed four to the other car,” he said, handing out pieces of copy paper. “Do you need one, Cap?”

“No, I’m good. I refreshed my memory this afternoon after meeting with Sloan,” Nathan replied, guiding the SUV out onto the long driveway and checking the rearview to make sure the other car was following behind him. “I suggest you all look over it while we drive, see if you can get it memorized before we stop, but bring the paper with you just in case.”

“Hell yeah,” Frederic murmured gruffly, flicking on one of the overhead lights and ducking his head to read, whispering the words under his breath.

They found the deserted parking lot of a darkened shopping mall and circled the metaphorical wagons, emerging from their vehicles and arming up. They were pretty close to the college, so they would patrol the outskirts of the campus as well as the surrounding neighborhoods. Nathan partnered them all off, instructing Judah to come with him. Just like he’d been with Alex, Nathan was protective of him.

After a quick comms check to make sure all their radios were in working order, they branched off. The distant hum of cars beyond their quiet bubble reminded Nathan that

they weren't actually alone. A city like LA never really slept.

"You know, when I was a kid, I wanted to come to this college," Judah said conversationally as they followed a well-maintained sidewalk past a manicured lawn dotted with trees.

"Oh, really? How old were you when the guild picked you up?"

"Seven. But I used to ride the bus to school, and it would take that road right over there." He pointed across the darkened campus toward the distant road, where street lights and passing cars were visible. "I always thought the buildings looked so huge and cool, you know, like something out of a movie."

Nathan understood, though the buildings reminded him a lot of the brick facades of HQ. The domed student center and the glass-walled library were impressive, though. They probably looked like castles to a seven-year-old. Buttery yellow light glowed from within the windows, and the wide sidewalks were lit with wrought-iron lamps, casting streaks of light across the mown lawn.

"It looks like you found your way here in your own time, after all," he pointed out, smiling lightly.

Judah's smile seemed tight around the edges. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I did."

"Something on your mind, Paladin Whitlock?"

"No. Yes. I don't want to talk about it." He scuffed his boot on the pavement.

Nathan swayed a little closer and nudged him with his elbow. "Come on. You can talk to me about anything."

“Anything?” he asked, raising his head to look imploringly at him. His hazel eyes were big and hopeful.

“Absolutely.”

Judah blew out a breath, and the words began to tumble out of him with increasing speed. “Okay. I just... you don’t think we’ll be ordered to go after Hawk and Morgan, do you? I worked the sign-in desk a lot, and I knew those guys, and they’re not bad people. I just really don’t want to have to choose between following orders and hurting them. Surely Commander Sloan wouldn’t order us to hurt human beings? That’s not what we’re supposed to be doing here, is it?”

“Okay, okay, slow down.” Nathan patted his shoulder. “I... I don’t know what Commander Sloan is going to have us do in the future, to be honest, and it’s not something I want you to worry about right now. I’ve reached out to them, those who’ve defected from the guild, and we’re working to build a truce between our groups. I hope that my efforts will assuage the anger that some in the guild harbor toward them.”

“What if it doesn’t?” Judah asked fretfully. “What if it doesn’t get better? What if?—”

“Shush, now,” Nathan said kindly. “You can’t think like that. You have to have faith.”

“In the guild?”

“In God, Paladin Whitlock,” Nathan said. “Above all else, above even the guild. Institutions come and go, but God is eternal, and He has a plan.”

Judah blinked at him like Nathan had said something particularly surprising. “I’ve

never heard anyone in the guild so much as hint that it would be anything but everlasting.”

Oh, that. “Well. I...”

“No, no. It’s refreshing. I think you’re right. Obviously things are changing. Two paladins have left the guild for halflings. I know people want to think they’ve gone rogue or turned evil or something, but I actually feel like it might be the opposite?”

“What do you mean, opposite?” Nathan asked. They turned down an alley between two tall buildings. Besides a couple of maintenance vehicles, the area seemed deserted, and the cloak of darkness would be ideal for monsters to hide in. Nathan absentmindedly turned on his lapel light, and Judah did the same.

“I think maybe it means the halflings aren’t as bad as we originally thought. They used to be human, right? And humans aren’t all good or all evil. Maybe halflings are the same.”

Nathan wondered if he would still think that if he knew that the black-eyed halflings like Talon weren’t halflings at all, but leviathans who’d never been human. Nathan didn’t want to disabuse him of the notion, however, so he held his tongue. Judah seemed far more open-minded than some of his older counterparts, and the defectors needed all the allies they could get.

“I think you’re right,” he said after a moment. “Especially after having spoken with some of the halflings that Alex and Luke are friends with. I just wish others in the guild thought so.”

“Yeah, we’re not really known for our open-minded—” Judah stopped, pointing at something ahead of them. “Uh. What’s he doing?”

Nathan followed his gaze. Ahead of them on the sidewalk, a young man stood like a statue. He wore a backpack and a college hoodie. His head tilted to one side like a wolf listening for prey. It was unnerving, but maybe Nathan was seeing a threat where there wasn't one. Perhaps the guy was eyeing them distrustfully, two unfamiliar men meeting him in a darkened alley with no one else around. Perhaps he felt threatened by their approach.

"Just... keep your distance," he said carefully, pressing closer to Judah so they could both give the stranger a wide berth. "Don't mind us," he said as they drew even with him.

He hadn't moved at all, hadn't even turned to watch them pass. Was he having some sort of medical emergency? Should they stop and see if he needed help?

"Mister?" he asked, pausing beside him. "Sir, are you okay?"

His head jerked toward Nathan so hard that he heard the bone pop. Beside him, Judah startled. The stranger's face was shadowed, but when his body turned, each limb jerked like a marionette, a twisted imitation of human movement. Adrenaline barreled through Nathan's veins. This wasn't natural.

"Nate," Judah said nervously.

"Sir," Nathan said, raising a hand. "Sir, stay back." God, he didn't want to have to hurt him. There was still a person inside this thing, right?

A low, snarling growl tore from his throat, and he lunged at them. Nathan caught his wrists, but his momentum sent them tumbling to the unforgiving concrete.

Judah depressed the button on his radio. "Behind the science building, help now, over!"

“Get him—get him off me!” Nathan shouted, struggling to push him away. His fingers, hooked into claws, hovered just above Nathan’s eyes. Horrid sounds spilled from his mouth, unnatural gurgles and hisses that Nathan wouldn’t have thought possible from a human mouth.

“I’ve got him!” Judah grabbed him by the backpack and jerked hard, falling back on his rear with the stranger prone on the ground between his legs.

The stranger recovered first, flipping over and lunging at Judah, who shrieked and tried to crab-walk away. Nathan threw himself at them, using his bulkier weight to pin the stranger down. An elbow nailed him right in the eye, and he twisted away, his face throbbing.

“We’ve got to hold him down,” he said, trying to grab the boy’s scrabbling hands. He found Nathan’s wrist first, jerking him forward and rolling them. Nathan cursed as he toppled over and landed on his back. A slender leg slung across his waist, and Nathan barely had time to raise an arm to fend him off as he lunged toward his throat like a rabid animal.

Teeth sank into Nathan’s forearm, and when he took a breath to scream, the stranger slapped a hand over his open mouth. Something small and cylindrical fell into his mouth from between his fingers. Panic seized him, and he managed to capture the thing between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. It was dangerously close to the back of his mouth.

The stranger’s teeth were still embedded in his skin, but the pain was an afterthought as he grappled with the slick capsule. God, he didn’t want to swallow it. The stranger’s black eyes—all black, even the sclera—were bright with triumph. He thought Nathan had swallowed it.

Hands dragged him off Nathan, and he rolled over, letting gravity do the work for

him. He spit the capsule out onto the concrete, sucking down a greedy lungful of air.

“Get his hands! Freddy!” someone was shouting, and Nathan turned, pulling himself together to help his squad, who were trying to hold him down.

The stranger fought hard, kicking Frederic with his free leg. He grunted but didn’t go down, pouncing on both of his ankles with all his weight. Aidan had his left arm, while Judah had his right.

“Cap, do the exorcism!” Aidan grunted. “He’s too strong!”

Nathan threw himself into the fray, pinning the boy’s shoulders down. “ Exorcizo te, omnis spiritus immunde ? — ”

He thrashed wildly, and then, quite abruptly, the black faded from his eyes and the fight drained from his body. Normal brown eyes blinked up at them, filling with tears.

“What—what’s going on?” he asked, his voice trembling.

At once, all four men released him as though burned.

Nathan leaned in, meeting his frightened eyes. “Sir? I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“I...” His body convulsed, and a gasp of pain escaped him. “What was that? I— ahh !” His body arched off the ground, and his chest heaved.

“Oh shit,” Nathan said, throwing himself at him once more. “It’s trying to break free. We have to exorcise it before it kills him.”

“What?” he shrieked.

He put a hand over the boy's heart and the other over his forehead, stumbling through the Latin words as quickly as his panicked tongue would allow. Bone cracked under his palm, the boy's sternum bowing outward, and Nathan's stomach roiled. Blood soaked into his shirt, mixing with the blood trickling down Nathan's bitten arm.

“Et in nomine Jesu Christi Filii ejus, Domini et Judicis nostre, et in vir ? — ”

The boy's chest broke open, and a bony, claw-tipped hand ripped through his shirt, wrapping painfully tight around Nathan's wrist. His screams trailed off, his body convulsing. He couldn't survive this trauma, and the demon was almost free. The footage of the first incident had shown them that the demon couldn't escape a dead host. There was only one thing to do.

“God forgive me,” he sobbed, drawing one of his knives. Rearing back, he brought it down hard, through the boy's throat and severing his spinal cord. His body slackened, and the demon's rattling growl cut off like a mute button had been pressed. The pressure from those bony fingers disappeared from his wrist, and calm silence filled the air around the panting group.

Aidan broke it first. “God in Heaven,” he whispered, crossing himself. “We have to clean this up. Nate's blood is all over him. We...” His eyes went a little glassy with grief, but he pressed on stubbornly. “We can take him to Maxwell. He can cremate him.”

“But...” Judah looked from one horrified face to the next. “No one will know what happened to him. What if he has family?”

“Look at what this looks like, kid,” Frederic said, his voice hollow. “Four men holding down a screaming, bloody young man?”

Bile rose in Nathan's throat.

“But that’s not—we weren’t—” Judah broke off. “We’d never ?—”

“No, we’d never,” Nathan agreed hoarsely, telling himself his eyes were watering because of the pain in his arm. “But the police won’t understand what just happened.”

Aidan sniffed hard, pushing himself to his feet. “I’ll bring one of the cars. Then we’ll take him with us.”

Chapter 13

Nathan

None of them spoke on the way back to HQ. Judah wiped his face suspiciously often, but he didn't make a sound. Nathan focused on driving calmly and predictably. If they were pulled over now, even the guild wouldn't be able to help them.

At HQ, he drove around to the medical wing at the back of the administrative building and sent Aidan in for Maxwell, who trundled out with a black body bag on a wheeled cot within a few moments. Nathan held his breath as he and Frederic gently laid the body into the open body bag. None of them moved as Maxwell zipped it up. As soon as it was out of sight, Nathan sent the others home.

"I'll write up the report and let you all sign off on it in the morning," he said, aware of the hollowness of his own voice but unsure how to change it. There was pressure in his throat, and his stomach churned like ocean water after a storm, frothy and dark. He watched them all trudge away silently, every set of shoulders slouched with defeat.

"You're injured," Maxwell noted as he positioned himself at the foot of the cot, preparing to push it back inside.

He'd wrapped the bite wound and the scratch marks from the demon's bony hand with some gauze, but it'd been a hasty job. Some of the gauze had started coming loose from the tape on the drive here. He'd been more worried about getting back to HQ. The adrenaline would fade eventually, but for now he barely felt the pain.

“Come inside, and I’ll clean you up.”

Nathan wanted to protest. He really wanted nothing more than to go home and be as far away from the body as he could get, but Maxwell wasn’t to be trifled with when there were injuries that needed tending. He followed sedately behind him, until Maxwell gestured for him to go into the examination room. All six of the cots in this room were empty, the sheets clean and white. The curtains around the beds were pushed back, and the whole room seemed to be waiting in anticipation of a human who needed tending.

He sat on one of the cots and waited silently while Maxwell delivered the body to another room, trying to swallow the pressure in his throat and calm the churning of his stomach.

“You’ve looked better,” Maxwell said when he returned, his gaze soft and knowing.

“I’ve felt better,” he croaked. “That was... the worst thing I’ve ever seen.”

Maxwell’s dark eyes were soft with sympathy as he wheeled a metal tray laden with supplies closer. “You’re lucky to be alive, sounds like.”

That was truer than Maxwell knew. Nathan tugged the plastic bag from his pocket while Maxwell removed the gauze from his left arm.

“The boy tried to make me swallow this,” he said. Inside the plastic baggy was the pill capsule he’d forced into Nathan’s mouth.

Maxwell stilled, then took the bag from him slowly.

“I managed to spit it out. I’m sure we’re all interested in knowing what it’s made of.” He imagined there’d be bone fragments and sulfur inside it, and a shiver went down

his spine at how closely he'd come to ingesting it. Would he have been like that boy, then? Enslaved by a possessor demon who wanted to burst out of his chest like an alien?

"You're very lucky to be alive," Maxwell said grimly.

He nodded dumbly. "Feels that way."

Maxwell set the baggy aside, pursing his lips. "I'm afraid Commander Sloan won't like that you found this."

'Found' was a generous term for how he'd come across that pill. "You think so?"

Maxwell dipped his head. "He informed the council of your 'twisted theory,' as he called it. He suspects you've been swayed by the traitors and their demons."

Nathan sighed. He was still too numb from everything that had happened to give that the outrage it deserved.

"If it's all the same to you," Maxwell went on easily, setting Nathan's bloodied gauze aside and turning his arm to inspect the bite, "I'd like to test the contents of the pill before I take it to the council."

Nathan unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth. "Could you tell me what you find? I'd like to inform the—traitors." He stumbled over the word, too strung out to pretend he meant it.

Maxwell nodded. "Of course."

A handful of stitches and antibiotic shots later, he was declared healthy enough to head home. The good doctor promised to fill Sloan in first thing in the morning and

demanding Nathan take until at least noon before coming in and writing up his report tomorrow. Nathan couldn't even summon the energy to argue.

He desperately wanted to go home. It didn't make much sense to him. He'd still be a murderer at home, but somehow he felt like familiar ground would make it easier to digest.

His body moved on autopilot without his permission, carrying him to his car. The drive passed in a forgettable blur, and soon enough he found himself sitting in his driveway. The porch light was on, like the house had been waiting up for him.

He turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car. A cool breeze blew gently through the trees, and his chin wobbled. His squad was gone. There was no one left to be strong for. This was the safest place he could be, and his body was done waiting.

Nathan crashed to his knees on the path, his keys clattering to the concrete as he vomited into the grass. In his mind, he saw the boy, his chest broken open and his eyes blank and unseeing. He could still feel the resistance of his spinal cord as he killed him, like hitting a root in the dirt. Mercy killing or no, he would never forgive himself for failing that boy. If he died and woke up in Hell, he would know without a glimmer of doubt that he deserved to be there, and he wouldn't even have to ask why.

He heaved until there was nothing else to throw up, leaving him shaking and sweating on his knees, tears streaking down his face.

Gentle hands touched his shoulders, and he startled, twisting away and reaching for a blade only to see white hair and familiar red eyes.

"It's okay, it's okay, it's just me," Storm said quickly.

Nathan's head swirled with confusion. "Storm? What are you doing here?"

“Waiting for you.” He shrugged, like it was the simplest thing in the world, but worry cut deep lines between his brows. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

Storm wouldn’t judge him for killing that boy, but Nathan couldn’t bring himself to admit what he’d done aloud. He shook his head, his face collapsing with grief. Tears ran hot down his cheeks, too fast for him to even wipe away.

“You’re freaking me out, sunshine,” Storm said. “Come here.” He opened his arms, and it was impossible to resist. Nathan pressed closer, and they curled around him, warm and comforting. Nathan only cried harder, hiding his sobs in the curve of Storm’s neck.

He heard the jangle of his keys, and then Storm was lifting him bridal-style, like he weighed nothing. Nathan clung to him, unwilling to raise his head.

A moment later, they were inside, and Storm closed and locked the door behind them, enclosing them inside Nathan’s private sanctuary.

“Where do you want to go? Sofa? Bed? Shower?” Storm asked, hovering by the door.

He was exhausted, but he needed to scrub his body until it was raw. “Shower,” he rasped.

Somehow, he didn’t expect Storm to undress him, but when they got to the bathroom, Storm set him on the bathroom counter and went to work on his military-style boots.

“I can?—”

“Shut up,” Storm said, his red eyes blazing. “I told you, you’re freaking me out. Let me do this.”

Nathan shook. ““Kay.” He was too scattered to protest.

His easy acquiescence didn't seem to set Storm at ease. He dropped one boot after the other to the floor, then turned his attention to the buckles holding Nathan's knives to his outer thighs, scowling deeply when they didn't spring apart right away for him.

Nathan wordlessly reached for the buckles around his legs, and when Storm saw where they were he swatted Nathan's hands away and loosened them himself. When they were off, discarded to the floor with his boots, Storm paused, cupping Nathan's face and studying him intently. His thumb swept slowly back and forth across Nathan's cheek, and Nathan leaned into it, fitting his hands on either side of Storm's waist and drawing him between his legs so he could rest his head on his chest. The languid, steady pulse of his heart soothed him, and Nathan felt as though he could breathe easy for the first time since the patrol.

Storm tried to peel himself away, but Nathan held fast. “I thought you wanted a shower,” Storm murmured, curling around him and squeezing reassuringly tight.

Nathan took a breath to speak, but it shuddered down into his chest and brought more tears to his eyes. He bit down on his lip, but there was no stifling it. “I'm—I'm sorry,” he keened. God, why couldn't he stop ?

“Don't apologize.” Storm's hand cradled the back of his head, threading into the short strands. “I'll stand here for as long as you need.”

Nathan melted against him, trusting that Storm could take his weight. When his hitching breaths subsided enough, he gently pushed Storm away and gave him a nod. Storm backed away, keeping one eye on him while he reached behind the shower curtain and turned the water on. He was more surprised than he probably should've been when Storm removed his own shirt, dropping it carelessly on the tile floor.

Nathan's sleeve was ripped, but it still hid the gauze well enough—that is, until Storm stepped into his space and tugged it off him. He made a soft noise under his breath, taking Nathan's wrist in hand.

“What did this to you?”

He didn't trust himself to speak yet. Instead, he unwound the medical tape and removed the gauze, revealing the very human-looking bite wound on his forearm, now closed with stitches and blooming with a dark bruise. The scratches from the possessor demon's clawed hand hadn't needed any stitches, at least. Storm's finger gently traced the curved shape of the teeth marks. When his red gaze met Nathan's, they were knowing. It probably didn't take a genius to figure out what did this. Nathan had texted them all earlier in the day about a paladin who'd been killed by a possessor, after all.

Storm softened, taking Nathan's face in both hands and guiding his face up to seal their mouths together. Nathan spared a thought for how gross he probably tasted, but Storm didn't deepen it. It felt like gratitude, this kiss, a soft brush of lips like Nathan was as precious as spun glass. Like Storm was reminding himself that Nathan was still there. And Nathan needed the reminder, too.

“Come,” Storm said, tugging him off the counter. “Shower. Then bed.”

He helped Nathan out of his black cargos and navy blue boxer briefs. Heat flushed through Nathan at the intimacy of it, but Storm didn't linger over the act or Nathan's nudity. He held the curtain aside so Nathan could step under the spray, then shucked the last of his own clothes and stepped in with him.

Nathan didn't expect that. He should've, since he saw Storm take his shirt off, but the minute Storm's arms wrapped around him under the heat of the water, he lost it again. He tipped his head back to rest on Storm's sturdy shoulder, the water pounding

against his chest.

His plans to scrub himself raw were forgotten as Storm massaged shampoo into his hair and ran the soapy washcloth over his skin. Storm's hardness was obvious, pressing against Nathan's bottom, but it seemed to be an afterthought as he guided Nathan around and urged his head back. Gentle fingers coaxed the suds from his hair and down his body, and he kept his left hand on Storm's shoulder the whole time so his stitches wouldn't get drenched.

When they stepped out of the shower, Storm tended to him first, wrapping him in a towel and buffing him dry. The action had tears springing to his eyes again, because Storm was being so endlessly patient and caring, but he fought them down this time. He couldn't keep weeping over every little thing. Falling apart didn't solve anything.

Still naked, Nathan gestured to the sink and padded over to brush his teeth while Storm gathered their dirty clothes and his abandoned weapons, carrying it all from the bathroom. Nathan stared at the hollow expression on his own face as he brushed the aftertaste of vomit from his mouth. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face pale. He looked like hell, and he felt like it, too.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Storm was waiting in the hall for him, as naked as the day he was born. He was holding a bottle of water from Nathan's fridge, the outside fogging with cold. He gestured to Nathan's bedroom, and Nathan led him inside, unable to muster any self-consciousness about his own nudity.

The bed was the most alluring thing he'd ever laid eyes on. He made it neatly each morning, but the blankets had already been pulled back. It was a small gesture but a thoughtful one, because Nathan felt welcomed into his own bed as he slipped beneath the blankets.

"Drink this," Storm said, thrusting the bottle at him.

Nathan took it as Storm slid into bed beside him. He realized as he brought the bottle to his lips that he was thirsty . He drank and drank, unable to stop until his lungs screamed for air, then lowered the crackling plastic with a gasp. Over half of it was gone now, and Storm was watching him with something like satisfaction. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and Storm set the bottle aside for him.

Laying in the dark, the boy's pale, horrified face swam before him, and he turned toward Storm, reaching blindly for his head and drawing him into a kiss. The electric brush of lips against his sent the ghosts skittering away, and he sighed with relief.

Storm pulled away first. "I don't think it's a good idea for more."

Nathan hummed in agreement, reeling him back in. "Just keep kissing me."

Storm obeyed, soft brushes of lips against his own that melted the last of the tension from his body. His eyes were dry and itchy, and closing them was a relief. The last thing he remembered was Storm's mouth on his own, the scent of tobacco and soap in his nose.

* * *

Nightmares plagued his sleep. There, that bony hand didn't disappear when the boy died. No, it tightened around Nathan's wrist, strong as steel, and dragged him toward the gaping, bloody hole in the boy's chest. Dragged him toward Hell itself. And why not? He'd killed someone. That was where murderers went, wasn't it?

A hand on his face drew him from sleep, and he heard himself utter a sound in his throat as the dream faded away. He was pressed face-first against a solid—not bloody or broken—chest, and the events of last night came back to him in quick flashes. The attack, the body, the front yard, and Storm. Storm, who'd carried him inside. Storm, who'd helped him through the shower. Storm, who was holding him in his arms like

Nathan was made for them.

“You were having a nightmare,” Storm whispered, threading his fingers into Nathan’s hair.

He turned his head, listening to the slow pulse of Storm’s heart. It was slower than a human heart-rate. One arm draped around Storm’s body, he traced the line of his spine up and down, framed by firm, relaxed muscle.

“I wish I knew what happened to you last night, sunshine,” he whispered, “but I won’t ask you to tell me.”

Nathan tipped his head back to look at him, awed by the raw concern he saw in Storm’s kind red eyes. He couldn’t deny that the connection between them was more than sex. Storm wouldn’t be here if that was all it was. How could Nathan fight something that felt so right? He didn’t know what would have happened if Storm hadn’t been there last night.

If he trusted anyone to hear the raw, unfiltered truth about what happened last night, it was Storm. He licked his lips, searching for the strength to put it into words. He’d likely have to tell this story more than once, but the first time would be the hardest. He’d rather give this one, the most emotional one, to Storm alone.

“Last night, we were on patrol near the college campus. We came across a possessed human who attacked us. During the scuffle, he tried to force me to ingest a pill capsule.” At Storm’s look of alarm, he added, “Don’t worry, I was able to spit it out. I gave it to our medical doctor to analyze. Anyway— mmph .”

Storm cut him off with a kiss, fingers clutching tightly in his hair. “Good, that’s good,” he said against Nathan’s lips. “Okay, sorry, continue.”

Nathan smiled, licking the taste of Storm from his lips. “Um. I... Where was I? Oh.” His face fell. “My partner called for backup, and between the four of us, we were able to hold him down and begin an exorcism.”

Storm shuddered but didn’t interrupt.

“But—he suddenly stopped fighting. The black in his eyes faded away, and then he was just a scared kid who had no idea what was happening to him, surrounded and pinned to the ground by four big guys with weapons.” His eyes burned, and he sniffled. “And then the demon started trying to break free. It was just like the footage I showed you. His chest broke open. A demon’s hand reached through the opening and grabbed me. There was...” He wiped the moisture from the corner of his eye. “There was too much trauma. I had no choice. The boy wasn’t quite dead, and the demon was too close. It was a mercy killing, I think, but it doesn’t change the facts. His blood is on my hands, one way or another.”

“No, Nate,” Storm said firmly. “His blood is on the possessor’s hands—or claws, or whatever they have. I’ve never actually seen one up close.” He shook himself. “It sounds like the boy was practically dead already when you ended things. You kept that demon from breaking free and ended someone’s suffering.”

“I killed a human being,” he whispered. “Isn’t that a sin?”

Storm softened. “Do you really think you’d go to Hell for that?”

“Wouldn’t I?”

Storm smiled softly. “No. And even if you did, I’d go down there and pull you back out. There’s no way I’m living on this earth without you now.”

That probably shouldn’t have been as reassuring as it was.

He pressed closer, reminded that they were both naked as Storm's length prodded his thigh. "Thank you for being here last night. I don't know what I would've done without you."

"Collapsed into your own vomit, by the looks of it when I found you." His tone was teasing, but there was very little mirth reflected in his gaze.

Nathan huffed halfheartedly. "I might've. I held it back for as long as I could."

Storm kissed him suddenly, and anything else he might've said was forgotten in the slick slide of lips and tongue. All the promises he'd made to himself about keeping Storm at arm's length were forgotten as the halfling rolled on top of him, urging his legs apart to make room for him between them. A bolt of heat went through him as he was reminded of the last time he'd been in this position.

Storm parted from him with a wet smack. "We're not doing that this time," he said, like he could read Nathan's mind.

"We're not?" He hated how disappointed he sounded to his own ears, and he knew Storm heard it, too, because he smirked.

"No. See, when you told me you'd never been with a man before, I didn't stop to think about what that meant. I rushed right into the main event when I should've taken the time to build you up to it. And then I left you alone the next morning like a casual fuck."

Nathan's face bloomed with heat. He'd told himself that was for the best. Was it only yesterday he'd woken up alone and sore? He felt like a new person.

"What—What would you have done instead?" he asked, breathless.

Storm smiled, revealing the elusive dimple by the corner of his mouth, and then ducked his head, kissing a trail down Nathan's neck and across his collarbone. "Taken my time with you," he said, muffled against Nathan's skin. "Kept you riding the edge until all you could say was my name. Made you feel things you never knew you could feel."

Nathan squirmed restlessly. His cock was heavy with need between his legs, but Storm wouldn't be rushed, teasing a path to one of his nipples and sucking it into his mouth. Nathan's breath whooshed from his lungs, and his legs clamped hard around Storm's sides, rutting up against the hard plane of his stomach as that wicked tongue flicked relentlessly over the hardened peak. He came off it with a hard, sucking pop, then moved to the other and gave it the same treatment.

On his way down Nathan's stomach, he said, "Relax, sunshine. Focus on what you feel, and clear your mind of everything but the pleasure."

Nathan consciously forced his body to relax, blowing out a breath and closing his eyes. He'd never trusted anyone like this before. He'd dated in the past, yes, but all of the women he'd taken to bed had been very vanilla, expecting him to do most of the work and that it would be good for him just by virtue of their being present. No one had ever lavished this sort of attention on him before, tracing his scars with their tongue and hungrily brushing every inch of Nathan's skin with their hands, as though to lay claim to uncharted territory. They hadn't been poor partners, per se, but they hadn't relished touching him the way Storm obviously did.

When he closed his mouth around Nathan's cock, Storm groaned out his enjoyment, like he'd been starving for the taste of him. He bobbed his head with languid ease, like he'd made himself comfortable and planned to stay there a while. This wasn't the hasty foreplay Nathan was used to. He felt savored.

"Storm," he moaned, carding his fingers through snow-white hair.

Strong hands held his thighs up and apart, and no amount of writhing would free him. Storm bobbed his head up and down, taking him all the way to the root, until Nathan began to feel that sticky, tingly heat building in his gut.

And then Storm released him, a firm grip wrapping around his base to hold off his release. Nathan bucked in frustration, digging his blunt nails into Storm's shoulders.

"Relax," Storm instructed. "I'll get you there. Don't be in such a rush."

Nathan huffed, trying to obey as Storm licked and sucked around the base of his cock, burying his nose in the coarse hair there and inhaling like Nathan's scent was more addictive than the cigarettes he smoked. He pushed Nathan's knees toward his chest and worked his way further back, licking and sucking his balls until Nathan was shivery with need and then using the flat of his tongue to lick his crease from end to end.

"God, Storm," Nathan whimpered.

Storm moaned. "Mm, love the way you taste, sunshine." He kissed Nathan's hole, his most intimate of places, and Nathan mewled, certain he was going to combust on the spot.

Storm gave him no quarter, licking and kissing and nibbling like he wanted to completely devour him. He speared his tongue into his entrance, and Nathan couldn't mask his cry at the hot, slick burn. He rotated his hips, mindlessly searching for more.

"Lube," Storm ordered, and Nathan craned his head to look at the bedside table. He could reach it if he stretched.

Storm peppered his thighs and hips with kisses as he grabbed the bottle, and as soon as it was within his grasp, Storm dragged him back into the middle of the bed,

drawing a surprised laugh from Nathan.

“You were too far away,” Storm said with a grin. “Now, close your eyes.”

Nathan obeyed, tingling with awareness as he heard the bottle cap open with a snap. A moment later a slick hand enveloped his cock, using deep and slow strokes up and down his length. Nathan groaned, his hands twisting in the sheets. A slick finger teased his entrance, smearing lube around before pressing smoothly inside. The sound that left him this time was a higher pitch, downright wanton, and Nathan couldn't find it in him to feel any embarrassment.

“That's it, sunshine,” Storm murmured, kissing Nathan's knee. “Just feel.”

And he did. Everything. Storm never increased the speed of his movements, guiding Nathan toward his release with slow, steady purpose. It didn't matter how much Nathan whined or moaned or pleaded. Storm led him right to the brink, and when he was sweating and panting and delirious with need, he finally tipped him over the edge. A hoarse cry tore from him as he came in thick, white ropes across his own stomach.

Storm hummed smugly, milking Nathan's cock of every last drop, until he was squirming with oversensitivity, and then ducked down, framing Nathan's hips with elbows and licking his cum from his skin.

“Oh my God.” Nathan stared, transfixed.

Storm lapped up every drop, looking completely blissed out by the taste. He worked his way up Nathan's body and sealed their mouths together, letting Nathan taste himself on Storm's tongue. His weight shifted onto one elbow, and Nathan glanced down to watch him take himself in hand.

“Wait, no,” Nathan said, pushing Storm away and sitting up. His legs were still draped over Storm’s thighs, and he couldn’t take his eyes off the cock rising proudly from the nest of dark blond hair.

“What? What’s wrong?” Storm asked, glancing between their bodies like he would be able to see the issue. His hands smoothed up and down Nathan’s thighs, his erection forgotten. It was endearing, really, how he laser-focused on Nathan’s needs.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just... I want to touch you.” He’d never really touched another man like this. Last time they were together like this, it was frantic, and just like this time, Storm had spent most of it focused on Nathan. He hadn’t been given much of a chance to explore Storm in return, and he wanted to. He wanted to know what the weight of Storm’s cock felt like in his palm, wanted to know what he tasted like. How deep would Nathan be able to take him? Not as deep as Storm could, obviously. But he wanted to find out. “Is that okay?”

Storm smiled. “Of course that’s okay.”

Nathan met his eyes as he wrapped a hand around his length. Storm’s eyes rolled back at the touch, and Nathan felt more powerful than ever. “Tell me what you like. I want to make it good for you.”

“Fuck, sunshine, you’re always good for me.” He rocked into Nathan’s fist, tunneling his cock through his tight grip.

“Come on, give me details,” Nathan coaxed, passing his thumb over the pearl of precum beading at the end of his cock and smearing it down his length.

“Mm, fuck.” Storm’s big hands found their way to Nathan’s shoulders, gripping ever so gently for purchase. “I pretty much like it all. You can use your hand or your mouth. You can put a finger inside me. I like a little pain with my pleasure, so don’t

worry about being too rough. That means you can use your teeth. You can skip the lube—although if you fuck me, that might hurt you . But really,” he guided Nathan’s face up and kissed him hard, “as long as it’s you, it’s already perfect.”

God, how was he supposed to respond to that? How could a demon be so wonderful to him? Storm seemed made for him. He could read Nathan better than anyone, knew exactly what he needed and wanted and provided it at all times, no matter how stubbornly Nathan tried to deny himself.

“Okay, lay back,” he said, shifting over so Storm could lay down. Once he was comfortably reclined, Nathan scooted back and hovered over his cock. It was a nice cock, long and thick—and uncut. Nathan wondered if that was an indicator of his age.

“All right, you’re making me self-conscious,” Storm teased.

Nathan cast him a smile. “Sorry. Just thinking.”

“About my dick?”

Nathan snorted out a laugh. “No! Well. Actually, yeah.”

Storm’s brows rose curiously.

Nathan grinned. “I’ll tell you later. I have something to do right now.”

Curling an arm behind his head, Storm settled back, cocking one knee out. He was the picture of relaxation, comfortable and confident in his nudity and inviting Nathan to look his fill. Nathan pulled the foreskin back to expose the plump head, surprised by how eager he was to taste another man’s cock. He leaned over it, trailing the flat of his tongue up the underside. Storm was warm and firm, his skin like silk layered over iron. He hummed at the first touch of Nathan’s tongue to his length, carding his

fingers into Nathan's short hair, gripping but not pulling.

Bobbing his head further and further down, he took Storm as deep as he could. When the head of his generous cock brushed the back of his throat, he backed off before his gag reflex could activate and found a comfortable rhythm, delighting in the salty taste of precum on the back of his tongue and the hypnotic slide of skin against skin. Best of all was Storm's reaction, the way his abdomen flexed and his moans rose, uninhibited. It made Nathan feel talented, sexy, powerful.

It was over flatteringly quickly, and he caught Storm's seed in his mouth, swallowing quickly so it wouldn't leak out obscenely. Storm moaned as his cock jerked, a punched-out sound that filled Nathan with smugness. He did that.

He rose with a shit-eating grin, and Storm chuckled, snagging him under the arms and reeling him in.

"Get up here, sunshine." When they were side by side, Storm thumbed his bottom lip and said, "How was that? Your smile says you enjoyed yourself."

"I did. That was fun. I never would've tried that if it weren't for you."

"Well, you're not trying it with anyone else ." He butted his forehead against Nathan's, growling in a way that only made them both laugh.

"Hell no," Nathan agreed, slinging an arm around Storm's trunk-like waist. "Just you."

"Good." He paused, then said, "Now tell me what you were thinking about my dick."

Nathan snorted. "All right, fine. It was just a passing curiosity, though."

“Tell me anyway. I want to know everything about you.”

Nathan softened. He stroked a hand up and down Storm’s side. “Is this body the same as your human body before you went to Hell? Is this what you looked like as a human?”

Storm tilted his head. “I’m not sure. I don’t remember much about my human life. Cobbled streets and oil lamps. I think maybe I lived in London? I came back from Hell there, so I assume that’s where I died, at least. And I…”

“What?”

“I woke up in a grave,” Storm said, blinking. “I had to dig my way out.”

“God,” Nathan breathed. He couldn’t imagine how disorienting that must’ve been. “If you lived in London, where’d your accent go?”

Storm shrugged one shoulder. “I came over here in the… eighteen-hundreds. I guess it just faded after a while. I’ve been in the States for two hundred years now.”

Nathan hummed. “So what happened when you first came back to Earth? Did you know what had happened to you? Did you remember?”

“No, it was all pretty hazy. Hell, those first few years on Earth are hazy, too. Demons can sense each other, so somebody found me pretty quickly after I got out and explained what was happening. We do that much for each other, at least.”

“And the white hair?” Nathan asked, eyeing it cheekily.

“Maybe I was older when I died.” Storm chuckled. “I don’t really know. You’ll notice most halflings look relatively young. That’s because our healing factor keeps

our bodies in peak shape. I assume that means that if one of us died elderly, we still come back looking like we did in our prime of life, because our cells regenerate to their healthiest point. As for the hair, most people think it's colored, but this is exactly what I looked like when I came back. I actually colored it brown for a few decades in the early nineteen-hundreds, just so I blended in better. By the seventies, it didn't matter so much anymore."

Nathan boggled a bit at the realization Storm had been on Earth for so long. He was hundreds of years old. A part of him wondered what Storm had done to warrant going to Hell, but it didn't sound like he remembered.

"What's Hell like?" he asked, his voice small.

Storm smiled, nudged his head back, and kissed him soundly. "It's Hell, sunshine. It's probably not the fire and brimstone you think it is, but it's not much fun. And we're given a choice to become halflings. Don't get me wrong, it hurts like—well, hell," he snorted, as though the concept of damnation and eternal torture were amusing, "but it was worth it, because I got to come back to Earth. I got to meet you."

Sparks of shock went down Nathan's spine. "Meeting me was worth the pain of literal Hell?"

"Definitely. Don't let it go to your head." He kissed Nathan on the forehead, chuckling at his own joke, and Nathan smiled, hugging him tight.

Halflings weren't evil. This one was proof that there was more to them than the paladins thought.

Chapter 14

Storm

Nathan dozed for a while longer, and later that morning, Storm was already awake when Nathan stirred, curling toward Storm's body heat and burying his face in his neck. Midmorning light streamed in through the curtains they hadn't bothered to shut last night, making the room uncomfortably bright, but none of the beams actually hit Storm or the bed itself. Even if he'd been directly in the sun's path, he wouldn't have moved. Holding Nathan through the night was a dream come true, and he wanted to kick his past self for sneaking off before morning last time when he could've had this that much sooner. Ira was right, he was an idiot. But he was an idiot who'd learned his lesson, at least in this regard.

"Morning," Nathan rasped, angling his head back to blink up at him. His hair was mussed, and there was a pillow crease on the side of his face. "For real this time. I have to get up."

"If you must," Storm replied. He'd much rather continue laying here with a naked Nathan in his arms.

"I must," Nathan said regretfully. "I have to go to HQ and give my report about last night."

A low growl rattled out of Storm at the reminder.

Nathan raised his head, smiling at him. "Don't worry. HQ is perfectly safe."

That was also debatable, but he didn't want to remind Nathan of the precarious nature of their secret relationship right now. Not when things were finally so good between them.

"I also need to check in with Doctor Maxwell. The sooner we find out what that pill was, the better."

Storm grumbled under his breath. He supposed that was true, but he was loath to let Nathan leave his sight. He'd been in bad shape last night. Storm didn't even want to think about what might've happened to him if he hadn't been lurking outside his house. A demon with far less affection for him might've stumbled across him, sobbing and vulnerable, and seized an opportunity.

"I have a job for you, anyway," Nathan said, sitting up and yawning.

"What's that?" Storm asked, following him upright.

"Go to the Rink and tell the others about what happened. And—I know Sloan technically took me off this case, but he can't stop you guys from investigating it." He hesitated, eyes narrowing, and then added, "And he can't stop me from helping you. I'd like to go to the demon club and ask around about the drug. There's got to be some kind of plan, right? Multiple possessors are trying to do this. It has to be for a reason."

Storm nodded slowly. Going back to In Extremis after their time away might make the halflings a little more tight-lipped than usual, because Lilith still blamed them for the attack on the club. No one would want to help them and risk getting on Lilith's bad side. But if they asked Talon to come along, too, maybe they could talk to Lilith herself.

"We can make it work," Storm said. "You come by the Rink tonight, and we'll take

you to the club. Surely somebody knows something. Lilith may not like it, but she probably won't like knowing people are dying, either. Anything that points the paladins in her direction pisses her off. We can warn her they're coming to question her, too. Maybe that'll make her more cooperative."

Nathan studied him with a soft frown. "Are things bad there? I don't want you to come if it'll put any of you in danger."

"Not so bad that I'm willing to let you go alone," Storm said seriously. He never thought he'd find anything that was worth facing down an angry Lilith. But he'd do anything for Nathan. Anything. "She's pissed that the paladins attacked her club. If we warn her that the paladins are planning to come back over this pill situation, maybe she'll let bygones be bygones."

"You think so?"

Storm shrugged. "It's worth a try, because you're right. These possessors are doing this for a reason. And it seems like they're targeting paladins." He leaned in and brushed his lips against Nathan's shoulder. "You're not safe."

Nathan smiled softly. "I hunt demons. I'm never really safe."

Storm pulled him closer. "You are with me."

He wanted to kiss Nathan's reddening cheeks, but instead Nathan pecked him on the lips and slid away.

"I can't live in a bubble, Storm."

Groaning, Storm stood and fetched his clothes from last night while Nathan stepped into the bathroom. He'd left his and Nathan's discarded things from last night in the

living room, piled on the sofa. After he dressed, he set the coffee to brewing.

When Nathan emerged, smelling like fresh deodorant and minty toothpaste, he was taping some clean gauze into place over the stitched-up bite wound on his forearm.

“You should let me heal that,” Storm said, batting his hand away and fixing the tape into place for him.

Nathan frowned in confusion. “Heal it? You can do that? How?”

“Our blood has healing properties. If you ingest it, it’ll heal you.” Slow heat moved through Storm at the thought. If Nathan agreed to take some of his blood, they’d probably wind up back in bed.

Nathan stared. Blinked. Stared some more. “Really?”

“Mm-hm. It would heal you as well as it heals me. Which is to say, you’d basically be immortal while it was in your system.”

He couldn’t tell if Nathan’s blank expression was good or bad. “Wh-What? Seriously?”

Storm nodded. “It’s the only reason Luke survived the attack from the paladins when he was banished.”

“Luke... The others all do this? They’re all—what, immortal?”

Storm’s nose scrunched. “I think so. It’s not like I’ve gone out of my way to ask. I never really wanted to hear about their sex life, know what I mean?”

“Sex life,” Nathan repeated, his voice high. “Sex life—it’s a sex thing? You’re

demons , of course it's a sex thing, forget I said that. They drink blood ?”

“Just a little. It's not like it takes a lot.” He took a breath to say more, to tell Nathan he didn't have to if he didn't want to, but Nathan slapped a hand over his mouth.

“No, wait, hang on,” he said. When his hand fell away, it lingered on Storm's chest, his thumb brushing a tiny wrinkle in the fabric of his shirt. “That's a lot of information to digest. Um.” He shook himself, then met Storm's eyes with an earnest look. “Thank you for the offer. I can't accept right now, because Maxwell would've given a report to Sloan about my injuries. If I show up miraculously healed, it'll be too suspicious.”

He tried not to pout, but if Nathan's widening smile was any indication, he didn't succeed.

“I'm not saying no forever,” Nathan continued. “Just not this time. Not when there's a risk we'll be discovered. I won't put you in danger.”

Storm brushed the gauze with his fingers. “This will scar.”

Nathan's sigh was a weary gust. “It won't be my first.”

With an unhappy growl, Storm crushed Nathan against him, ignoring his halfhearted sputtering and instead focused on the way Nathan's arms wrapped around his waist without hesitation.

“Oh, yeah, I have something for you before we go,” Nathan said, squirming until Storm released him. He opened up a drawer near the coffeemaker. The contents within rattled, and Storm leaned around Nathan to see that it was filled with junk. Pens, post-its, loose change, paper clips, screwdrivers, scotch tape. Nathan picked something out and closed the drawer, turning around to hand it to Storm.

It was a key.

“What...” He took it slowly, uncomprehending.

Nathan took a fortifying breath. “It’s a key to the house. You... showed me last night that I can trust you in my worst moments. I can’t keep pretending I don’t feel something when I do. It’s crazy fast, but I don’t care. You’re welcome here, whenever you?—”

“Always,” Storm said quickly. “I want to be here always. With you, by your side, no matter what.” He lunged forward, kissing him hard. Nathan’s hand—and the key—were trapped between their chests. “No one’s ever given me a key before.”

Nathan’s laughter against his mouth was sweet. “Glad I got to be one of your firsts.”

“Firsts don’t matter, sunshine. You’re my only, and that’s all that matters.”

Nathan’s lips parted, awestruck, and a blush crawled up his neck. “You can’t just say stuff like that,” he breathed.

Storm smirked. “Try and stop me.”

* * *

Eventually, Storm had to concede to Nathan’s plans for the day. On his way to the Rink, he sent a text in the group chat and requested they all meet him there. Some of them were likely already there, but he only wanted to tell this story once. He didn’t want to relive the moment he’d discovered Nathan on the front lawn any more than he had to.

Talon’s car was absent from the parking lot when he arrived, as was Shadrach’s, but

that wasn't surprising. He found both demons waiting inside with the others when he entered. Not for the first time, he envied their ability to teleport wherever they wanted to go.

They were all huddled around a steaming carafe of coffee at the snack bar, passing the box of sugar around and adding various creamers to their cups. Storm swore each one of them preferred a different flavor.

"Why are we here so early?" Alex asked, yawning.

Storm debated having a cup of coffee, but he didn't trust himself not to crush the little styrofoam cup. He folded his arms, deciding to barrel right into it. "Nate was attacked last night."

The humans looked far more alarmed than the demons, who showed only mild interest at the statement.

"What? Is he okay?" Luke asked.

"He's mostly fine. He's got a bite wound on his arm and some scratches. It was another possessed human. It tried to force a pill down his throat."

Alex's eyes widened, and Talon's head tilted.

"He didn't swallow it," Storm added quickly, and all the humans relaxed. "He gave it to the guild's doctor to analyze."

Talon rolled his eyes. "That's a shame. I would've liked to have seen it for myself."

Ira folded his arms, looking discomfited. His hair spilled in loose curls around his face and shoulders. "I'm sorry, Storm. I didn't see anything about this attack. Is he

really okay?”

Storm forced himself to take a deep, calming breath. He was beyond pissed about what Nathan endured last night, but it wasn't Ira's fault. “Yeah, he's okay. He was pretty shaken, but he seemed better this morning. It's not your fault for not seeing it. It's not like you get to choose your visions.”

Wolf nodded, wrapping an arm around Ira.

Storm sighed. “The truth is... he and the other paladins tried to do an exorcism and save the human, but it didn't work. The demon broke through just like that footage he showed us, and Nate... ended the human's life. It severed the connection that the possessor was using and prevented it from breaking free.”

“Wait, wait,” Talon said. “You're saying it was breaking free? The human wasn't quite dead, and the demon was on its way out when Nathan killed the human to keep the possessor from getting out?”

Storm nodded wordlessly.

“That's not what happened in the footage we saw,” Talon said, glancing around at the others. “The human's chest exploded, and he died. But this new one, it was almost out.”

“They're learning how to do it,” Ira said grimly. “And they're getting better at it.”

“What happens when one of them breaks out?” Alex asked. “What's their plan?”

“That's what we need to figure out,” Storm said. “Nathan wants to come by tonight and go to In Extremis. He thinks someone there might know something.”

“That could be,” Wolf said reluctantly, “but whether they’re willing to talk to us now is the real issue.”

Storm’s eyes slid to Talon. “That’s why I was hoping a heavy hitter like yourself might tag along.”

Talon gave a grudging sigh, and Shadrach laughed.

“We’d be happy to,” Alex said with a beatific smile, leaning into Talon’s side.

Talon shook his head, looking resigned. “You know, my life was a lot easier before you came along, little bird.”

Alex wasn’t fazed. “Yeah, but you just had to have me.”

Talon’s face softened, and he kissed Alex’s forehead. At one time, Storm would’ve rolled his eyes—like Shadrach was doing—but now, it just made him miss Nathan. It would be hours before he was able to pry himself away from HQ and sneak over to the Rink.

Talon looked at Storm. “Fine, we’ll meet your human here tonight and go piss Lilith off a little more. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Malachi snorted out a laugh.

He’d been on the fence about the humans at one time, but he was more grateful for them than ever now. They would make sure the others didn’t turn their backs on him and Nathan, and loath as he was to admit it, Storm would probably need their help to keep him safe.

Chapter 15

Nathan

That morning, lounging in bed with Storm and making plans for the day, it hadn't seemed like a big deal to agree to meet at the Rink. But now, pulling into the craggy parking lot, Nathan paused to appreciate the gravity of what he was doing. People who chose this side didn't stay with the guild. Alex was banished. They tried to kill Luke. They wanted to hold Ira prisoner indefinitely until he managed to escape.

What would Nathan's outcome be? Here he was, disobeying a direct order from Commander Sloan himself, allying with the so-called traitors and their demons for the greater good. Sloan wouldn't see it that way, though. He would only see it as a betrayal. Was Nathan drawing a line in the sand with his actions?

He blew out a breath. Yes, he knew he was. For better or worse, he couldn't go back to the time in his life before he'd met Storm. He couldn't turn his back on the connection they shared. There was a lot they still didn't know about each other, but one thing was clear: when this happened, their fates were sealed. Just like Alex and Talon, Luke and Malachi, Ira and Wolf. They met their demon, and they were never the same.

It was unlikely—downright improbable—that he and Storm should meet and fall for each other like they did. Storm seemed to have chosen him the moment he laid eyes on him. It was strange, and if he were a doubting man, he'd think there was some truth to Sloan's conspiracies. How could so many of them have fallen organically for demons? From the outside, it would be easy to assume something nefarious was

going on. But in truth, being with Storm felt like a missing piece had been returned to him, a piece he'd never even realized was missing. His life had gone from bearable to wonderful.

Which meant he had a choice to make. Could he go back to bearable? Did he even want to? The very notion had his stomach twisting with anxious nausea. Now that he knew what life was like with Storm, he didn't want to give him up. But could he give up everything else to be with him?

He wasn't ready to give up the guild yet. He wasn't ready to admit the truce had failed. If he could establish some kind of ceasefire between them, then maybe it would be okay to leave the guild. Sloan had given him a week to keep working with them, and after that, one way or another, Nathan would have to choose. The guild or Storm. The life he knew, or the life he could have. It was like being forced to choose between his soul and his heart.

The Rink's glass door swung open, and Storm appeared before him, haloed in the glowing lights from within. Mesmerized by the sight of him, the smile that brightened his face and the way the lights highlighted his hair with gold, Nathan shut off the engine and slid from the car.

"Hi," he said, feeling almost bashful. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so excited to see anyone .

Storm grinned, dragging him in and wrapping his arms around him. "Hi. Miss me?"

Miss him? An embarrassing amount, really. Nathan fought his widening smile. "A little."

Storm leaned in, brushing their lips together. "Just a little?"

“I can’t admit how much. That’d give you too much power over me.”

“Power over you,” Storm repeated, his gaze heavy-lidded like Nathan’s nearness was intoxicating. “Sunshine, I already have power over you.”

That was true. Nathan didn’t really understand it, but Storm could make him do almost anything. It would be frightening if he didn’t trust Storm with absolutely everything.

They’d known each other for a few days. How quickly things had changed.

“Does that go both ways?” Nathan asked, tipping his head back and kissing Storm more firmly. “Do I have power over you, too?”

Storm chuckled, the deep sound rolling down Nathan’s spine to pool in his gut. “I’m walking into Lilith’s place with you tonight, aren’t I? You tell me.” His teeth nipped Nathan’s bottom lip. Then, he groaned, rolling his eyes. “In a minute!”

Nathan tilted his head in confusion.

“The guys want me to bring you in,” Storm explained. “They were very concerned when I told them about the attack.”

Oh, right. They all knew he’d killed someone. His shoulders started to hunch, but Storm squeezed him tightly.

“No, none of that. You have nothing to feel guilty about.”

Nathan sighed. “I can’t help it, Storm.”

“Then I’ll just keep reminding you until you start to believe me.”

Nathan shuddered as the weight left his shoulders. The guilt wasn't gone—wouldn't be gone for a very long time, he was sure—but here, in Storm's arms, he didn't have to be strong. He could relax the tension that twisted him tightly in the day to day. Storm would never judge him for anything, and having someone give him that kind of support left him feeling shaken, the way a wound ached after a thorn was removed. It was still painful, but it was a good kind of pain. The freeing kind.

For just a moment, he tucked his nose in the warm curve of Storm's neck, just letting himself be held. Storm's big hands splayed wide across his back.

"Okay," he finally said, straightening. "We can go in now."

Storm offered him a smile. "Okay, sunshine."

Nathan let himself be led to the door, his fingers tangled with Storm's, who seemed to have no intention of letting him go.

Inside, everyone was scattered around the open space. The disco ball twinkled merrily above Angela and Zachary's heads. Their wooden practice swords clacked together, and it looked more like they were playing than training. Ira was pouring himself a cup of coffee at the snack bar. Wolf, Talon, and Alex stood near the air hockey table, while Luke and Malachi stood at the half-wall, smiling at the kids' antics.

"Can't I convince you to stay behind?" Talon said to Alex as they approached.

Alex smiled patiently at him. "No."

Talon's breath gusted from his lungs, ending with a low growl that sounded more like a jungle cat than a man. "It's dangerous."

“Exactly. I like Nate. I don’t want Lilith to eviscerate him.”

Nathan’s brows rose. Was that a concern? He glanced at Storm, who shook his head.

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” Talon said.

“You barely tolerate Nathan,” Alex said.

Talon’s mouth opened in offense. “Are you saying you don’t trust me?”

Alex’s mouth twitched. “I trust you with my life, Tal. I’m just not sure I trust you with his life.”

“Ouch,” Nathan said. “And hello. What a nice conversation to walk in on.”

Alex greeted him first, fairly skipping over and shaking Nathan’s hand. “Hey, man. Storm told us about what happened last night.” His gaze fell to the gauze on Nathan’s forearm. He’d used less today, but there was no hiding it with his short-sleeved shirt. The material was stark against his suntanned skin. “Glad to see you’re okay.”

Over Alex’s shoulder, Talon watched them, unmoving.

Nathan focused on Alex, offering him a weak smile. “Thanks. It was... a rough night. I feel terrible about what happened to that boy.”

Luke joined them then, clapping Nathan on the shoulder. “It sounds like you did all you could for him, and in the end you made sure he wouldn’t suffer any longer and protected your squad. You did what any of us would’ve done.”

Nathan’s expression twisted. He didn’t want to cry in front of old shield-brothers and their demon partners. Desperately, he scanned the room for Storm, who’d moved

away to let the humans talk together. His red gaze was steady, like a hand waiting to catch him, and when Nathan's eyes found his, he mimed taking a slow, deep breath.

Talon glanced between them, ever observant, but there was no judgment on his face.

Ira drew Nathan's attention next, stepping directly in front of him. The serenity he exuded did almost as much to calm him as Storm's attention.

"You did the right thing," Ira said confidently. "The mercy you showed him won't be punished. Rest easy."

Nathan blew out a breath. "Thank you, Ira."

Alex returned to Talon's side, and Talon argued, "And hey, I tolerate him. If I didn't, I wouldn't allow him to be here. Besides, you would all eviscerate me if I let anything happen to him. So he'll be perfectly safe."

"Yes, because I'm going," Alex said, reeling Talon in for a quick kiss. "I'm a paladin, remember? Well. Former paladin. I'm a fighter. I can handle Lilith and her halflings."

"I never doubted that," Talon said plaintively. "I just prefer keeping you somewhere safe."

'I can't live in a bubble, Storm,' Nathan had said just that morning. The urge to protect was universal for demons, he supposed. How strange.

Wolf checked his phone. "Xyra put me in touch with a friend of hers, Magda. She's one of the new bartenders at In Extremis, and she says Lilith just arrived. You guys are good to go whenever you're ready. You sure you don't need the rest of us to tag along?"

Talon shook his head. “No, showing up as a huge group would just make us seem more threatening. We’re there to ask questions, not bully anyone.”

“Aw, really?” Malachi pouted as he and Luke joined them around the table. “Not even a little bit? For me?”

Talon chortled. “Don’t tempt me. We can’t get answers and piss Lilith off at the same time, as entertaining as it might be.”

“We don’t want to make things harder for ourselves by giving her more reason to hate us, either,” Ira pointed out.

“Ah, fine,” Malachi said, slinging an arm around Luke’s broad shoulders. “It’s not like I’d be there to see it anyway.”

“We should get moving, I guess,” Nathan said. “The sooner we find out about these pills, the better.”

“Yes, may as well,” Talon agreed. “I’d like to get this over with. I have better things to do with my night.” He leered at Alex in a way that left little to the imagination.

“Let’s take my truck,” Storm suggested as they turned toward the door. “I don’t fancy trying to squeeze into the back of your little sports car, Talon.”

“I didn’t bring it, anyway,” Talon said. “Harder to track us if I teleport us everywhere.”

Nathan hummed. “Have you guys all taken the chance to move, by the way?”

“We did,” Talon said, filing out of the Rink behind Nathan and holding the door for Alex. “I own a couple of properties, so it was easy to move to another. One of them is

actually an apartment complex. The others are staying there for now, too, just to be on the safe side. And I may or may not be looking into real estate overseas, if shit should hit the fan. Ira's been tight-lipped whenever I ask him about the future, but he didn't tell me not to buy a hidden-away mansion somewhere in Europe or the Baltics, so..." He shrugged.

Nathan eyed Storm as they climbed into the truck, Talon and Alex taking the backseat. "What about you? Did the paladins ever follow you home?" He'd never been to Storm's apartment. Was it safe?

Storm nodded. "They followed any of us they'd seen interact with Alex and Talon. I moved at the same time as the others. Remind me to show you my place sometime." He cast Nathan a smile. "It's got a nice view."

Nathan struggled to hide how much the idea pleased him. He did want to know where Storm lived. Wanted to know everything about him. "I'd like that."

The drive passed in a companionable blur. Nathan hadn't been out on a mission with Alex since before his banishment, almost a year ago now. The Alex he saw now was vastly different from the one he remembered patrolling with back then, though. Gone was the simmering anger that had lurked below the surface. This Alex was relaxed, and his smiles appeared readily. It was like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and Nathan wondered if it was vengeance or love that had done more for him. He suspected the latter, because he felt the same buoyancy when he was in Storm's presence. Like the whole world was a little brighter.

He couldn't blame Alex for willingly going with Talon, now that he knew what Alex must have felt at the time.

They stopped in a fenced-off parking lot across the street from the club. Nathan studied the outside of the warehouse with interest. He'd never been inside In

Extremis before, and he had to admit, he'd always been curious. The windows of the converted warehouse were painted black, and a lone halfling stood guard at the door. That used to be Storm's job, and his gaze slid to Storm's profile curiously. Did he miss it?

"No weapons," Talon said, glancing between Alex and Nathan.

Alex nodded in agreement, and Nathan shook his head, raising his hands. "I didn't even bring any." He'd left them in the trunk of his car. If he'd needed anything, he'd assumed they would have mentioned it before leaving the Rink.

"Good. Demons get squirrely when they see holy weapons. Bad enough you're walking in there with that ring on," Talon said, unbuckling his seatbelt and reaching for the door.

Nathan looked down at the signet ring on his finger. The ruby looked black in the darkness, stark against the white pearl of the cross that was inlaid in the middle. "Should I remove it? I'm here on guild business."

"No, it's fine," Storm said. "People will be wary, but they're already going to be wary of us. Seeing your ring won't make that much of a difference."

They crossed the street as a group, Alex and Nathan side by side with Talon and Storm at their backs.

The bouncer stepped in front of the door, crimson eyes bouncing from face to face. He was almost as tall as Storm, but not quite as broad.

"Tripp," Talon greeted.

The halfling nodded in greeting, blowing a lock of dark brown hair back from his

face. “What’s your business here? I’ve been told not to let you in.”

“We just want to ask some questions. We’re not here to cause any problems,” Talon said.

“You asking questions might cause problems.” Tripp arched a bushy brow. He nodded at Nathan. “This one’s a paladin.”

“I’m unarmed,” Nathan said.

Tripp looked away, smirking. “You won’t want to come in tonight anyway.”

“Why’s that?” Storm asked.

“There’s a new admission policy. All humans have to take one of these.” He withdrew a plastic baggy from his jacket pocket, bulging with little black capsules.

Nathan’s head spun.

“What the hell?” Alex blurted.

“Lilith is forcing people to take these as a price of admission?” Talon said incredulously. “They’re killing people!”

Tripp looked confused. “What? No, they aren’t. One dose doesn’t kill anyone.”

“What about multiple doses?” Nathan asked urgently. “People who come back to the club multiple nights in a row. Have any of them stopped showing up?”

Tripp tilted his head thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I don’t pay that much attention.”

Nathan's palms were sweaty. It was easy enough to find a local article written about the dead boy on his phone. Sloan's police friends had suppressed most of the information about it, but the tragic death of a college-age kid was still noteworthy. He zoomed in on the kid's photo and held it up for Tripp to see.

"Have you seen this guy here before?"

Tripp studied it for a moment, then pursed his lips, bobbing his head back and forth. "Yeah, maybe. Looks a little familiar."

Alex looked stricken. "I thought halflings didn't kill people."

Tripp drew himself up. "We don't. I told you, these pills aren't hurting anyone. It just increases the fun. That's what Lilith told me. She said it'd make people drink more."

"But you don't know exactly what it does," Nathan said. "That's all she told you?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "Above my pay grade, I figured."

Storm rolled his eyes.

"Neither of you is taking one of those," Talon told the humans.

"Then no entrance," Tripp declared.

Nathan hesitated, eyeing the bag of pills. They really needed to talk to Lilith. She was responsible for this, and he wanted to know why.

"Nate," Alex said, pulling him from his thoughts. "What do you think?"

"It's too dangerous," Storm said.

“If it’s true that one dose doesn’t kill,” Nathan said slowly, ignoring the sick twist of his gut, “maybe we can do this. We take it, go in, get our answers, and stick our fingers down our throats as soon as we get out.”

“What if it takes too long?” Talon asked. “What if Lilith is uncooperative? What if a fight breaks out?”

“Hey,” Tripp said, “there’s no fighting allowed inside?—”

“Shut the fuck up, halfling, and mind your business,” Talon snapped. To the humans, he said, “It’s too big a risk.”

“Not if it takes multiple doses,” Nathan said. He could barely believe he was even arguing in favor of this. But if it meant getting answers, he owed it to the dead to do this.

Alex looked uncertain, but he said decisively, “We’re taking Tripp’s word for it that these pills take multiple doses to kill?”

“Hey,” Tripp protested. “I’m telling you. We have some regulars here tonight who have had at least five in the last week, and they’re just fine.”

Nathan blew out a breath and stuck his hand out. “Just give me one.”

“Sunshine,” Storm murmured, curling a hand around the back of his neck.

He fully intended to make himself throw up the minute they were out of the club. Tripp dropped one of the capsules in his waiting palm, then gave one to Alex. Their eyes met, and Nathan saw his own trepidation reflected back at him in Alex’s blue eyes.

“Cheers,” Nathan said, tossing the pill back and working it to the back of his throat. He’d never swallowed a pill without water before, and it took him a minute to force it down. Anxious heat flashed down his spine as it went, and he hoped he didn’t just sign his own death warrant.

They both opened their mouths to prove to Tripp that they’d swallowed them. He nodded in approval, pocketed the bag, and opened the door for them.

“ Nice . Enjoy. Try not to cause any problems with those questions of yours.”

Talon growled as he passed, and Nathan followed them into the dark maw of the club.

The disorienting haze and muted, multicolored lights of the club made it feel like stepping into another realm. A crush of bodies moved sinuously out on the dance floor, haloed by tables and chairs. The bar was across the room, the lights behind the bar seeming like spotlights compared to the cloaking darkness of the rest of the club. Booths lined two walls, and there were bodies on every surface. Chairs, tables, booth seats. Kissing, grinding, thrusting. People wearing leather harnesses, people wearing silky black ropes, people bound with shiny silver chains.

He didn’t know where to look, his eyes roaming from one scene to the next.

Storm’s body crowded against his back. “You good, sunshine?”

Yes, he was good. His eyes fell across a man near the back of the room, pinned against the wall by a halfling whose mouth was latched onto his neck. The man was shirtless, wearing an elaborate leather harness that secured his wrists behind his back. His head was thrown back against the wall in bliss, his spine arching as the halfling massaged his groin through his khakis.

How good would it feel to give Storm control like that ? To be bound and completely at his mercy? A bolt of white-hot lust speared through him, and he quickly tore his eyes away from the two men.

Storm's big hand took him by the jaw, turning his head and capturing his mouth with his own. "Tell me those thoughts later, sunshine, okay? I'd love to hear whatever you were just thinking."

Nathan was going to melt straight into the floor. If he told him—and he would, by God, if Storm told him to—then Storm would do it. Nathan knew he would. He was already half-hard at the very idea.

"Uh-huh," he agreed weakly.

"Let's go talk to the bartenders first," Talon suggested. He had an arm draped around Alex, who was fairly clinging to him.

Nathan understood, because he slipped under Storm's arm as they wove through the crowd. Storm's body was solid and warm, fingers curving around Nathan's shoulder with possessive intent. It felt good to be held by him. Cradled by him.

He turned his head, inhaling Storm's heady scent. Leather and tobacco, clean soap and musk. He wanted to lick him, and before he could think better of it, he leaned in to do exactly that, his nose skimming the underside of Storm's jaw and following it up with the tip of his tongue.

"Sunshine," Storm groaned. "Not that I'm not interested, but I thought we were here for a purpose."

"We are," Nathan said distractedly. God, his whole body felt like it was on fire. He was restless, burning with the need to move, and he wanted to move like everyone

else here. Wanted to rut and taste until he couldn't stand upright anymore.

Sounds seemed sharper. The music overhead was loud, but it took on a new pitch, like Nathan could hear details in the music he'd missed before.

"Oh fuck , little bird." Talon's aggrieved voice cleared some of the sticky haze from Nathan's mind. His voice should've been masked by the music, but Nathan heard him clearly. He turned his head to see Talon backing Alex up against the bar, pulling Alex's hand up from where it had slipped into the back of his dark-wash jeans. Before he could say more, Alex tilted his head back and captured his mouth. Whatever Talon was going to say was lost as he let Alex plunder his mouth.

That looked fun.

Nathan guided Storm's head down, urging his mouth open and pressing his tongue inside. Storm's groan rumbled through every point where their bodies touched. He wrapped strong arms around Nathan's waist, crushing their bodies together, and backed Nathan up until he was right beside Alex against the bar.

With effort, Storm pried his mouth away, panting, and looked at Talon. "Something's wrong."

Alex's face was hidden in the curve of Talon's neck, and Talon nodded with a rapturous look on his face. "Uh-huh."

Nathan barely registered their words. Everything around him felt fantastic . Even the cool surface of the bar behind him felt amazing, and he reached back, laying his palm flat and closing his eyes.

Dimly, he realized this wasn't normal. He always reacted to Storm, but not like this. He'd never thought touching a bar top was a sensual experience.

“Oh God, it’s the pills,” Nathan groaned, pulling Storm closer and trying desperately not to start working himself on his thigh. He’d be embarrassed about this later, he was sure.

“The pills? What are they doing?” Storm asked. “How are you feeling, exactly?”

“I feel amazing,” Nathan groaned. “Everything feels fantastic. The music sounds sharper. Everything I touch feels good. I feel like I could take on the world.”

Talon looked at something beyond Nathan’s head and snapped his fingers. “Magda! Hey, Magda! Come here.”

A dark-skinned woman with short curls strode over, cleaning a glass. “What’s up, Talon? Haven’t seen you around for a while.”

“What exactly do those black pills do?” He sank his fingers into Alex’s hair and pried his slick mouth away from his throat. Nathan watched the hickey heal right before his eyes.

Magda smirked, looking from Alex to Nathan. “It makes them feel like us .”

Talon cocked his head, and Nathan looked up at Storm. “Is that true? Do you feel like this all the time?”

Storm looked nonplussed. “I don’t know.”

“Yep,” Magda supplied. “It makes their senses sharper, makes them feel stronger, makes everything feel ten times better. Pain will barely register while they’re high, so don’t let them do anything stupid.”

“I don’t think we’re this horny all the time, are we?” Storm asked, taking Nathan’s

chin and tilting his head back to peer into his eyes. Nathan smiled at him, nipping one of his fingers.

Magda snorted. “Why do you think we’re here all the time? Hell yeah, we’re that horny. That’s why this club is so damn successful.”

“That’s a good point,” Storm grouched. “Well, what do we do? They’re too distracted to talk to Lilith.”

Talon sighed. “We’ll do the talking. We can’t leave them alone. I don’t think they can be trusted down here right now, so we’ll just have to bring them with us.”

Alex pulled away from him abruptly and adopted a scowl. “Hey, I’m not hot for just anybody, y’know. I’d punch out anybody who tried to mess with Nate or me.”

“Exactly,” Talon said. “You think you can ‘take on the whole world,’ as Magda said. You’re turned on, surrounded by other people who are turned on, and the minute somebody laid a hand on you, you’d start a fight with the whole damn club.”

Alex beamed. “I would.”

Nathan laughed at his unrepentant face. “I’d help.”

Storm chuckled. “Got to love the honesty.”

Talon groaned, peeling himself away from Alex like it caused him physical pain and taking his hand. “Come on. The sooner we get some answers about these pills, the sooner I can take you home and fuck you like you want.”

Alex moaned dramatically, and Nathan laughed again, letting Storm drag him after them.

“Fucking sounds nice,” Nathan said, and Storm’s head fell back in despair.

“Just you wait until I can get you alone, sunshine.”

“Is throwing up the pill out of the question?” Talon asked as they left the crowd, going to a black door around the side of the bar that Nathan never would’ve noticed on his own.

“Probably,” Storm said, “since it’s already affecting them. Do you think it’ll be okay?”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

They ascended up a set of black stairs. The hallway at the top was also black, and red lights in the ceiling gave everything a crimson glow. Nathan ran his fingers along the glossy wall, humming at the cool sensation.

Talon didn’t knock on what had to be Lilith’s office door. He strode right in, towing Alex after him—and stopped just inside the door.

“Put those away,” he said.

Storm and Nathan rounded the doorframe and stopped behind Talon, giving Nathan a view of Lilith’s blacked-out office. She sat behind her desk, tapping red nails on the polished black surface with an air of impatience at Talon’s untimely interruption. Behind her, on either side, two halflings had handguns pointed at them.

“You think you can just barge in here whenever you want?” Lilith asked poisonously.

“We’re just here to talk,” Talon said. “Tell your goons to put those away.”

“Or what?” Lilith asked. “You don’t call the shots here, leviathan.”

“I can cross this room and snap your neck.”

“If you do that, they’ll shoot your human.”

Talon stiffened, then relaxed. “Then we’re at an impasse, because we’re not leaving until we’ve talked. So either we can talk, or you and Alex can die. What’ll it be?”

Alex squeaked out something indignant.

It had to be a bluff. There was no way Talon would actually let anything happen to Alex... would he?

Lilith narrowed her eyes. For a tense moment, no one moved. Then, with a sigh, she waved a hand, and the halfling goons lowered their guns.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s talk.”

Page 16

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Chapter 16

Storm

The last thing Storm wanted was for Lilith to learn about his feelings for Nathan, but it was far too late to worry about that. Now, he focused on her, determined not to let Nathan's wandering hands distract him from the conversation. Somebody needed to keep a clear head, and Storm wanted to be that for Nathan now.

"What do you want?" Lilith asked, sitting back in her chair and crossing her legs primly. "Why are you here?"

"The pills," Talon said. "Why are you distributing them? What's your plan?"

Lilith's blood red lips curled into a slight smile. "I'm just providing a service for a client."

"Which client?"

"Ah-ah-ah. That's confidential," she said.

"What do the pills do?"

She gestured to Alex and Nathan. "Can't you tell?"

Storm glanced over. Nathan's hand was trailing up and down Storm's abdomen, and Alex was doing the same to Talon, his blue eyes distant like he was lost in the

sensation of the cotton on his palm.

“Magda said it makes them feel like us,” Storm said. “Is that true?”

Lilith’s gaze darkened as she turned toward him. “I see you’ve got one now, too,” she said, looking disdainfully at the ring on Nathan’s hand. “It’s spreading like a plague.”

Storm scowled.

“The pills, Lilith,” Talon said. “We need to know their purpose.”

She shot Talon a simpering smile. “Why, chaos, of course.”

Talon shook his head. “They’re targeting paladins.”

“Are they?” She blinked innocently. “Like I said, I’m just a distributor. I have nothing to do with their purpose.”

“They’re killing people,” Talon said. “If we can trace them back to you, so can the paladins. I thought you didn’t want more heat on your club?”

“It won’t matter if the pills do what they’re meant to.”

“Which is ?” Storm prompted impatiently.

Lilith sighed, flicking a hand through the air. “Think about it, boys. The paladins are all in a tizzy about some of their members falling for demons. They’re blaming us , even though the majority of us have nothing to do with you all. To ensure our own safety, we’re... taking the fight to them, in a way.”

“‘We?’” Talon repeated. “Who is ‘we?’”

Lilith's throaty laugh danced through the air. "You're not the only one with a lover. It just so happens that mine has sway in Hell."

"Who?" Talon asked.

"I don't believe you've met. And it doesn't matter. He's hiding very well right now while his people work on perfecting the pill."

"Perfecting it?" Storm asked. "You mean it's not already doing what it's supposed to?"

Lilith laughed aloud. "Not at all. You think it's supposed to take seven doses before the possessor can break free? And even then, it's not fast enough. The host dies before it can get out. Human bodies are so goddamn fragile."

Under Storm's arm, Nathan shuddered.

"What's the point?" Talon asked. "Why bother with possessors? If you want to go after the guild, just recruit your army of halflings. Don't you have enough people already who would do your bidding?" He gestured to the goons on either side of her, who both stiffened in offense.

Lilith scoffed. "Halflings were once human. They have the same selfish nature as their human counterparts. They're cowardly and self-serving. They only do what I want because I provide them with services they want to use, like the club and the drugs. No, halflings aren't a sufficient army to go up against the guild—not with their holy water and blades. But possessors? They're remarkably strong in Hell. So strong, in fact, that it was considered balance for them to be unable to travel with their physical bodies to Earth. But give them an avenue to the surface, and they'll not only be powerful adversaries, they'll be loyal. They'll fight for our cause—or rather, his cause."

“Who?” Talon barked. “Give me a name.”

“No,” she said gleefully.

Talon growled and took a step toward her. The goons behind her raised their guns—not at him, but at Alex and Nathan. Storm stiffened, and Nathan’s hand went from petting his stomach to clenching in his shirt.

“Talon,” he warned. Nathan hadn’t had his blood. If he was shot, he would die.

“Now you know,” Lilith said dismissively. “I’ve answered all the questions I’m going to. You know what the pills do and why. Just keep your humans from ingesting any more , and they’ll likely be fine.”

“That isn’t the point—” Storm started.

“It’s the only point you should concern yourself with,” Lilith said coldly. “If you’re worried about your human, convince him to take that ring off and leave his precious guild.”

Nathan made a noise under his breath.

Lilith went on, addressing Talon. “You’ve never involved yourself in my affairs before. I suggest you don’t start now. My companion’s desire to handle the guild for me has nothing to do with you or your human. Stay out of the way, for both your sakes.”

“I don’t take kindly to threats,” Talon said gravely.

“It’s no threat,” Lilith said calmly. “But truly, wouldn’t it be in your best interest to let the possessors handle the guild?”

“There are good people in the guild,” Nathan murmured, scrubbing his jaw on Storm’s shoulder.

Lilith rolled her eyes. “‘Good’ is subjective. No, we’re done here. It’s time for you to go.”

Storm met Talon’s assessing gaze. They couldn’t press without being threatened, and she wouldn’t hurt them. She’d hurt Alex and Nathan.

“Fine,” Talon said. “We’ll go.”

Nathan raised his head. “We will?”

“Yep. Come on, Nate.”

Storm hauled Nathan back out of the room with Talon and Alex on his heels. Talon was frog-marching Alex in front of him—likely because he didn’t trust Lilith’s goons not to shoot him in the back if presented with the opportunity. None of them spoke until they were downstairs, their voices masked by the pulsing music overhead.

“What now?” Storm asked.

“We know a demon is pushing the drugs, and Lilith is helping distribute them. We need to find out where they’re coming from.”

“We could come back without the humans, push her until she talks,” Storm suggested.

“No, she’s obviously upped her security.” He tilted his head. “Did you know she had a lover? Has she ever talked about anyone before?”

“Not that I know of. I mean, I just guarded the door. It’s not like I was part of her inner circle or anything.”

Talon hummed. “I’ll talk to Xyra, see if she knows anything.”

“The boy,” Nathan said suddenly, straightening.

“What boy?” Storm asked.

“The dead one. He was a college student.” Nathan swayed like he was drunk. “We go there. Ask around about him. See if he was buying it elsewhere. It can’t just be coming from the club. Too easy to trace back to Lilith.”

Talon inclined his head. “That’s true. It would be incredibly easy to trace it all back to her if this was the only place distributing it. You think it could be getting around the campus somehow?”

“He was a college student. We were on the campus when I was attacked,” Nathan said, slipping one hand under Storm’s shirt to flatten against his stomach. Storm tried not to outwardly react, but the touch made his cock twitch in his jeans.

“Okay, team, let’s brainstorm more when they’re sober,” Storm suggested.

“Yes,” Talon agreed. “I’m going to take him home. Don’t worry about driving us.”

“All right. Text the others for me and let them know we’ll meet to discuss everything with them later?”

“I will. See you tomorrow.”

They disappeared from sight before Storm could even nod, and he focused his

attention on Nathan. “You ready to go home?”

“Home,” Nathan repeated, leaning into him. “It’s so far.” He hugged Storm’s waist and nuzzled his neck, sucking hard.

Storm bit back a moan. “I really think you’d prefer to be at home before we start anything too fun.”

“No,” Nathan whined.

“No?”

“Take me to your place. I want to see it.” Nathan raised his head, drawing Storm into a deep, drugging kiss, slick with tongue and full of heat.

Storm forgot what they were supposed to be doing. Nathan’s hands roamed his body, and Storm pushed him up against the wall by the door, devouring his mouth until Nathan was moaning and panting, rubbing himself against Storm like he’d completely forgotten they were in a room full of drunk people.

Because of that, Storm forced himself to slow down, prying his mouth from Nathan’s and urging his pretty gray eyes to focus. “We’re going to my place, and then I’m going to fuck you.”

Relief passed across Nathan’s face. “Yes, please .”

God, he loved when he begged. “Okay. Come on.”

* * *

Storm had never given much thought to whether his living space would be to anyone

else's liking. It served him well enough, and that was all that mattered—until now.

Nathan, who normally sat in the passenger seat, was now squeezed into the middle seat of Storm's truck, tucked tightly up against Storm's side as he wove through traffic. His hands roamed Storm's body, and Storm struggled to keep his mind focused on the task at hand. Driving, and, idly, wondering what Nathan would think of his open, warehouse-style apartment. He'd bought the upper floor of a development in its early days a few years ago. The rest of the floors had been divided up into smaller apartments, but his hadn't been. He'd left it mostly empty, keeping it as a backup place, which had recently come in handy when they'd all moved to throw the paladins off their scent.

"There's no way you feel like this all the time," Nathan said, pressing his lips to the curve of Storm's shoulder. His pupils were blown wide, his mouth open and panting lightly.

Storm grinned. "Why is that?"

"Because you'd never let me leave the bed."

"It's a real hardship," Storm admitted. "I imagine it's different for us, though. If what you're feeling is really how we feel all the time, it's normal for us. We've adjusted to it, so it doesn't feel exaggerated for me like it does for you right now."

"I see. But at first?"

Storm shrugged. "I don't really remember it all that well, but probably. Being back on the surface is pretty overwhelming all on its own, anyway. The bright lights, the sounds, the smells."

"Mm," Nathan hummed against Storm's shoulder. "You smell good."

Storm grinned. “Just a little longer, sunshine.”

“I can’t wait,” Nathan whined.

“Yes, you can.” He’d never envied Talon’s ability to teleport more. He cast about for something to distract him. “Hey, tell me what you were thinking when you first walked into the club. You had an odd look on your face.” He rested his hand on Nathan’s thigh, stroking gently with his thumb.

Nathan hummed under his breath.

“Were you just overwhelmed?”

“No. Well, yes. But no. I saw people in restraints. I wondered what it would feel like to surrender like that with you.”

Storm’s cock hardened rapidly at the thought. He could make that happen at his apartment, if Nathan wanted it. He had the means—and the gear. As the bouncer, he didn’t often take people home from the club. It was more likely he’d wind up in a VIP room with someone after his shift, but he still had all the right toys of his own, should he want to bring someone home for a more private session. It hadn’t happened in months, and he could think of no one he’d rather break that streak with than Nathan. Only Nathan. Always.

“We can do that if you want, sunshine,” Storm said. “Say the word.”

Teeth pressed against his bicep. “Please.” The words were damp against his skin.

Hell yes.

They couldn’t get to his apartment fast enough. He burned rubber coming to a stop in

the parking garage below the building and all but hauled Nathan out of the truck after him. In the elevator, he pressed Nathan to the wall by the buttons and pressed the one for the top floor.

“Do you want a safe word?” Storm asked.

“Safe word?” Nathan’s eyes were blown wide, his face and neck flushed.

“Yes. A random word you say if you want the sex to stop.”

Nathan looked affronted. “Why the hell would I want the sex to stop?”

Storm grinned. “Okay, your word is London. If you feel overwhelmed or need to stop for any reason—even a drink of water—I want you to say it. Okay?”

His nonplussed expression didn’t fill Storm with confidence. “Okay.”

“What’s your word?”

“London.”

“Good. The minute we step out of this elevator, I’m taking over. You do everything I say, exactly as I say it.”

“Why?” Nathan asked.

Storm leaned in, capturing his lips in a heated, hungry kiss. “Because if you do, I’ll make you feel incredible .”

Nathan’s eyes hooded with want. “Okay.”

The elevator dinged. Storm didn't turn as the doors opened, watching Nathan's eyes dart to them and back, waiting. His pretty gray eyes were wide with anticipation, and Storm could barely believe this was really about to happen. Nathan was going to let him have him, however he wanted. Where did he even begin? There were so many things he wanted to show him.

He gripped Nathan's shoulders, sliding down his arms to his hands. Nathan's breath left in a quiet whoosh as Storm tugged him away from the elevator wall and into the hallway. His was the only door on the right, and windows lined the left.

His apartment was mostly open. A minimalistic kitchen with gray cabinets and sleek, white marble counters sat on the left. Bare brick walls, wide windows, and tall, twenty-foot ceilings made the space seem cavernous. The bathroom was in the corner on the right, and living room furniture dotted the room. In the back corner, his bed awaited in the loft upstairs. They would get there eventually. For now, Storm led Nathan to the sofa.

"Take your clothes off. All of them," he ordered.

Nathan's face was flushed as he silently obeyed, trembling fingers divesting himself of his clothes one piece at a time. Shirt, boots, socks, jeans, boxers. It all wound up in a pile over the arm of the sofa, boots on the floor beside it. When he was completely naked, his cock hanging full and heavy between his legs, Storm adopted a stern expression.

"I said everything."

Nathan's brow furrowed. He looked down at himself, going so far as to pass a hand down his lightly furred abdomen, as though double-checking that he hadn't forgotten anything.

Storm captured his left hand, raising it to show him the guild ring.

“Oh,” Nathan breathed. “I rarely ever take that off. I don’t even notice it most of the time.”

“I know.”

For a moment, Storm thought Nathan would resist. He studied the ring on his own finger like he was seeing it for the first time, and then, just when Storm was taking a breath to speak—though he had no idea what he would say—Nathan tugged it off and dropped it on top of his clothing.

A shiver of triumph went through Storm.

“Bend over the couch,” he ordered next, “and spread yourself open wide for me.”

Nathan’s lips parted. His bare feet shuffled on the wood floor as he turned, bending over the back of the sofa so that his chest was pressed against the top of the cushions. With a quiet whimper, he reached back and spread himself open.

There was no other power like this, Storm thought as he blanketed Nathan’s naked body with his clothed one. He took his time, bestowing kisses, licks, and nips across every inch of skin he could reach. Nathan’s neck, ears, shoulders, back. His hands roamed while his mouth moved, down Nathan’s flanks and back up, petting through his chest hair and the trail of it down his stomach. He licked his fingertips and teased Nathan’s nipples until the man was writhing beneath him, the sensitive buds hard beneath the pads of his fingers.

Nathan whimpered and moaned, arching his back and pressing his body back against Storm, but he never spoke. Never asked for more. He took what Storm gave him, and it made Storm want to push .

He dropped to his knees. Nathan's fingers left divots in his own ass cheeks, and his pink, puckered hole waited like a gift for Storm to take. He dove in with deep, hot kisses, spearing his tongue inside over and over. He palmed the heavy sac hanging between Nathan's legs, and his knees parted further, going up on his toes and pressing back against Storm's mouth.

"Storm," he whimpered.

"Shh," Storm breathed against one cheek. "I've got you." One hand slipped past his sac, taking his length in hand and pumping firmly.

Nathan moaned, thrusting into his fist. A punched out sound left Nathan, muffled against the back of the sofa where he'd hidden his face. Storm sank his tongue inside his hole as he worked his cock, and Nathan's back arched, needy. His free hand held Nathan's hip, stroking soothingly as he focused his mouth on his hole, kissing it hungrily and massaging the ring of muscle with his tongue. Nathan's cock was leaking precum onto his fingers, slicking his grip. He liked this a lot; that was good. Storm could do this for hours, working Nathan toward the edge with his mouth.

"You're such a good boy," Storm praised, licking deep into his hole. "Doing so good for me. Doing exactly as I asked."

Nathan shuddered above him.

Reluctant as he was to stop, he didn't want to fuck him over the sofa, so he stood and guided Nathan up with him. Nathan stepped into his embrace right away, trembling, and tucked his face into the curve of Storm's neck. His hard length pressed against Storm's hip, but he made no move for more.

"Let's go upstairs," he said. He felt more powerful than ever like this, fully dressed while Nathan was naked and desperate under his hands.

They walked slowly to the bedroom, tangled up in each other, Nathan walking backwards as they traded hungry, sloppy kisses. When they reached the foot of the stairs, Storm grabbed two handfuls of Nathan's ass and lifted him up. Nathan wrapped his legs around Storm right away, and Storm carried him up like that, their tongues tangling. He kept one hand on the railing and took his time, careful not to stumble with something so precious in his arms. Nathan trusted him to keep him safe, and he'd be goddamned if anything happened to him on Storm's watch.

At the foot of the bed, Storm paused, gazing down into lust-filled gray eyes and filled with affection for this trusting human in his arms. He'd do anything to keep Nathan by his side.

He gently lowered Nathan to his feet and said, "On your knees, sunshine."

Nathan's lips parted as he dropped deftly to his knees, his hungry gaze falling to Storm's groin.

Storm stepped back, and a hint of uncertainty found its way to Nathan's eyes. Storm offered him a reassuring smile as he undressed, tossing his shirt away and toeing off his shoes. Nathan relaxed again as he watched, and when Storm was as naked as he was, he returned, stroking Nathan's cheek with one hand and guiding the fat head of his cock to Nathan's lips.

"Open up. Take me as deep as you can."

Nathan, Storm reminded himself, didn't have much experience sucking cock. So it was a surprise when he sealed his lips around the head and started inching his length into his mouth, past the level of comfort, until Storm felt the back of his throat. The muscles there constricted around him as Nathan's gag reflex kicked in, but Nathan didn't stop, opening wide and fighting it.

“Sunshine,” Storm started to protest.

Nathan shook his head lightly, pulling back and sucking him back down. His mouth was hot and tight, pleasure crawling through Storm’s veins as Nathan found a stubborn rhythm, taking him a little deeper each time, like he was determined to have him all, one or another.

Storm resisted the urge to let his eyes fall shut. He wanted to see this, Nathan on his knees and taking him deep. His lips grew red and slick, saliva dripping down his chin and Storm’s balls.

When Nathan whimpered, a hand fluttering against Storm’s leg as though to pull him closer, Storm asked, “What do you need, sunshine? Tell me.”

Nathan didn’t use his words. His hands closed around Storm’s hips, pulling him in as Nathan moved his head, and a jolt of heat went through Storm.

“You want me to fuck your face?”

Nathan’s eyes rolled as they fell shut, blissful.

“Fuck, sunshine. You sure?” Storm couldn’t believe it. Nathan was still pretty new to this. Was it the drug?

Nathan nodded, tongue flicking against the underside of Storm’s cock. He whimpered, sucking hard.

“Okay.” Storm threaded his fingers into Nathan’s hair to hold him still and thrust into his mouth. His throat convulsed around Storm’s cock, but there was no hesitation on his face. In fact, he moaned, sucking when Storm pulled back, like he could stop Storm from going too far with suction alone. “Goddamn, Nate.”

Chapter 17

Nathan

Nathan's head buzzed. This was everything he never knew he needed. Everything he never even knew how to ask for. Storm fucked into his mouth with slow, steady purpose. For once in his life, Nathan wasn't the responsible one. He wasn't making the decisions. It was nice to know he had a safe word, that he could pull the emergency brake and stop this train if he absolutely needed to, but he wouldn't. He knew he wouldn't. He wanted to give this to Storm. He wanted to shed every ounce of choice. Let Storm give him whatever he wanted. Let him take whatever he wanted. Storm would make sure he felt good in the end. Storm would protect him. He didn't have to worry about a thing here. He could just be .

He'd never felt so safe with anyone before.

His cock was rock hard between his legs, but he didn't reach down to touch himself. Storm hadn't told him to, and he didn't want to end this too quickly by rushing things, anyway. Every nerve ending was alight with pleasure, his nipples tingling and his hole burning from the recent stretch of Storm's tongue.

He wanted more . His fingers curled around Storm's thighs, pulling and tugging.

"More?" Storm asked gruffly.

Nathan nodded, suckling the head of Storm's spit-slick cock. A noise of dismay left him when Storm abruptly pulled it out.

“Say it with words. I need to hear it.”

“More, I want more.” Nathan barely recognized his own gravelly voice. “I need it. Harder, deeper, please.”

Storm grabbed him by the chin, not hard but rough enough to get his attention. Storm’s red eyes stared intently into his own. “Tell me.”

“I want it,” Nathan whispered. “I want to give you everything. I want you to take everything. I want to feel only you, every bit of you, everywhere. Take me and make me yours.”

“Jesus.” It sounded strange coming from a demon, but Nathan supposed it was more of a curse than a prayer. “You pinch me if you need me to stop.”

“I will.” He wouldn’t.

Storm pushed him against the foot of the bed, his shoulders and neck against the edge. He barely took a breath of surprise before Storm’s cock was tunneling back inside his mouth, pushing all the way in. Nathan’s nose brushed the coarse hair around the base, his throat fighting against the intrusion. His head swirled, and then it was gone, pulling back and shoving back in, over and over. Nathan’s body got with the program, slurping and sucking as Storm used him just like he wanted. Nathan couldn’t go anywhere or do anything but take it. His eyes watered, and his fingers scrabbled at Storm’s thighs, never pinching but gripping for purchase. All the while, Storm’s fingers combed delicately through his hair, an endearing juxtaposition from the aggressive thrusting of his cock.

He wasn’t ready for it to end when Storm suddenly pulled out, kneeling down and picking Nathan up. He yelped in surprise, his stomach bottoming out as he landed on the bed with a bounce. Storm didn’t follow him down, though. With a fierce look on

his face, Storm rounded the bed, pulling something out and tossing it down beside Nathan.

It was a tangled strip of black, and it took him a moment to realize he was looking at a rope. Heat bloomed under his skin, and he met Storm's eyes.

"Okay?" Storm asked.

Nathan nodded, and Storm's face collapsed with disapproval.

"Words," Storm growled.

"Yes. Good."

Storm nodded. "Good. Sit up. On your knees."

Nathan obeyed, his cock so hard he shook with the desire to touch himself. Storm's hands were strong and sure as they braided the rope around his upper body. He guided Nathan's hands behind his back and tied them into place, and when all was said and done, Storm stopped in front of him, smiling.

"Look down," Storm said.

Nathan did, peering at the rope that crossed his shoulders and chest in an intricate design that looked a little like...

"Is this a pentagram?"

Storm chortled. "Yeah."

Nathan smiled. "How blasphemous."

“How does it feel? Not too tight?”

“It feels perfect.” And it was true. The only thing that would make it better was Storm’s hands on his body, doing what Nathan couldn’t do for himself.

Storm gave him a gentle push. “Lay back, sunshine.”

Nathan let himself fall backward, and Storm followed, guiding his legs up and apart in that vulnerable position that took his breath away every time. He squirmed as Storm trailed kisses up and down his inner thighs, inhaling his scent at the bend of his hip and massaging a thumb over his hole.

“Close your eyes,” Storm said.

Nathan obeyed. The bed shifted, and when Storm returned, he was beside him, sliding an arm under Nathan’s head and nudging a leg to drape over his hip, keeping him spread wide. Slick fingers spread lube around his hole, and then one pressed inside. Nathan moaned, turning blindly for a kiss. Storm’s finger sank deep inside, and Nathan wanted to sob, because it was exactly what he’d been missing. His breath left in a grunt, and his hips jerked toward Storm’s hand.

He’d done so good at obeying and not begging for more, but the words tumbled out of him now. His lips brushed Storm’s as he spoke. “Please, Storm, fuck me. I need you inside me. I need to feel you. I can’t wait.”

“I’ve got you, sunshine,” Storm whispered. “I’ll fuck you soon. First, I want you to fall apart like this, in my arms and on my fingers. Spread wide, feeling me all around you.”

Nathan whimpered.

“You can do it.”

He could, far too easily. Storm’s finger moved rhythmically in and out, with long, mercilessly fast strokes. When Nathan thought he couldn’t stand any more, a second finger squeezed in with the first, burning hot and hitting all the right spots. Nathan panted against Storm’s lips, too overwhelmed to kiss but unwilling to move away. His spine arched, fists clenching against his back. His neglected cock wept against his stomach, leaving sticky smears every time he moved.

“Please. Please,” he said mindlessly.

Storm’s free hand found one nipple, and Storm leaned over him to take the other in his mouth, sucking and pinching as he fucked him hard and fast with his fingers. Nathan gasped, raising his hips up off the bed as his orgasm burned through him. He shouted, cock jerking and body shuddering. Storm just hummed, letting him spill across his stomach.

Floating in a haze of pleasure, Nathan barely felt Storm roll him over. Warm hands smoothed up and down his body, tugging on knots and checking his circulation, then spread him open wide. Nathan moaned as Storm’s thick cock tunneled inside him. He pinned Nathan’s hips down with his own, legs braced on either side of Nathan’s, and planted his hands on Nathan’s shoulder blades. He was completely at Storm’s mercy, and a bolt of burning heat went through him.

Grinding in deep, Storm leaned over him, growling in his ear, “Tell me you’re mine.”

“I am,” Nathan sobbed.

“Tell me.”

“I’m yours,” he swore. “I am. It scares the shit out of me.” He sucked down a sharp

gasp and kept going, unable to stop. “I never knew I could feel like this. You see me, every part of me. You make me feel things I never thought I could. So good, so safe, and I don’t—know what to do without you. I can’t, I can’t live without you, and I don’t know what I’ll do but I just know I belong here. Please, Storm, please tell me, please don’t stop, oh God, I... I...”

Storm grabbed his chin and forcibly turned his head, kissing him quiet. Nathan tried to twist to get to his mouth better, but Storm wasn’t having it, slamming his hips down harder to keep Nathan where he wanted him.

“You’re mine,” Storm told him, still holding his chin. “All mine. You’re not going anywhere, not ever. Not back to the guild, not away from me, no. You want me to tell you? You stay. Stay here with me. Let me love you. Let me have you. Drink my blood, stay with me forever. Say you will.”

“I will!”

“Say it!”

“I’ll stay with you! I love you, oh God, I can’t believe it, but I do. I love you, I love, fuck, I’m coming, Storm. Storm, Storm !” He screamed as he came, bucking under Storm as he came untouched for the second time, burying the sound in the mattress and biting the sheet. His hole clenched around Storm’s merciless cock, and Storm filled him up with heat as he followed him over the edge, shoving in as deep as he could and stilling on top of him.

It was a little hard to catch his breath with Storm on top of him, but Nathan didn’t care. He groaned when Storm pulled out and lifted off him, leaving him feeling hollow and cold. Before he could do more than that, Storm used the knots between his shoulder blades to pull him to his knees. Nathan groaned again at having to hold himself upright long enough for Storm to untie the knots.

His breath hitched as his arms were freed, and Storm paused at the sound.

“Sunshine?”

He did it again, unable to stifle it. “I’m sorry.”

“Nate.” He said it so tenderly that Nathan’s eyes pricked with tears. The rest of the rope fell away, and then Storm was there, curling around him from behind. “What is it, sunshine? Did I hurt you?”

“No. I just feel...” He felt like he was floating, like he’d left every earthly worry behind somewhere far below. Everything but this moment was inconsequential, and he’d never felt this kind of relief before. He’d attended sermons and said his prayers all his life, but somehow it was a demon that gave him true peace.

“Bad?” Storm guessed with dread.

“No, no, I feel good .” He turned in Storm’s arms to hide his face in his neck. “I feel so good. Everything you said, did you mean it?”

“Yes,” Storm said solemnly. “I meant every word. I want you to be mine forever.” He paused, then hesitantly ventured, “Maybe we should talk about this tomorrow? I know I’m kind of dumb when it comes to this stuff, but I’m pretty sure you’re still high. That might be contributing to the highs and lows you’re feeling. Do you think you could sleep?”

Yes, he could definitely sleep. His body was heavy and lax with satisfaction. He nodded.

“Good. Come here, lay down.” He pulled the blankets back, and they climbed under together.

Nathan collapsed mostly on top of Storm, whose hands swept up and down his body. One ventured over the swell of his ass, sliding into his crack to graze his hole.

“Do it,” Nathan muttered.

“Hm?”

“Do it, I want you to. Feels sore and empty.”

Storm’s finger slipped inside, and Nathan gave a sigh of relief, hitching his leg up to give him more room and tangling their fingers together on Storm’s chest.

“Sleep, sunshine,” Storm murmured. “I promise, I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 18

Storm

Storm woke up before Nathan the next morning, and after a few moments of admiring the man's sleep-lax muscles, he rolled out of bed to make breakfast. He left Nathan, sprawled out on his stomach with the sheet crumpled around his hips, and padded downstairs to cook breakfast. He had no idea if Nathan would be hungover from the hex pill, but he figured food couldn't be a bad thing.

Scrambled eggs and pancakes later, he stacked everything on a rarely used tray and carried it upstairs to find Nathan sprawled out on his back this time, one hand knuckling the sleep from his eye.

"Wh' time is it?" he mumbled.

Storm checked his watch. "Just after ten."

Nathan groaned.

"How are you feeling?"

Nathan paused, assessing. "Physically, fine. Not even sore, which is weird. Emotionally? I'm a little embarrassed."

Storm chuckled. "Why? Here, sit up."

“Why? What—oh.” Nathan sat up, crossing his legs under him so Storm could set the tray in front of him. “You made me breakfast.”

“Yeah.” He sat down beside him, taking his chin and guiding his face up so Storm could get a good look. He looked surprisingly well-rested for how late they’d stayed up, but his cheeks flushed with pink the longer Storm looked at him. “So, tell me why you’re embarrassed.”

Nathan lowered his eyes. “I was just so— needy last night. Not just here with you, but at the bar, in front of Alex and Talon. I could not stop touching you.”

“In your defense, Alex was the same way with Talon.”

If possible, Nathan’s face darkened further. “I’m not sure that’s better.”

“It means he’s probably as embarrassed as you are right now.”

Nathan huffed. “I just—I’ve never felt like that before. Does it feel like that to drink your blood?”

Storm shook his head. “Alex wouldn’t have reacted to the drug like that if that was the case.”

Nathan picked up his fork and speared at a piece of egg. “Right.”

“Do you... remember everything clearly?” Storm desperately wanted to ask if he’d meant everything he said while they fucked, but he wouldn’t push if Nathan couldn’t remember.

The blush might become a permanent fixture at this rate. Nathan nodded, shoveling egg into his mouth and avoiding Storm’s eye.

“And... did you mean everything you said?”

Nathan plucked at the sheet that barely covered his lap. He nodded again.

Relief and triumph swept through Storm at equal paces. He made a choked noise that drew Nathan’s attention, then leaned in and kissed Nathan’s bare shoulder, cradling his face with his free hand. He worked his way up his neck, across his flaming cheek, and kissed his eggy mouth.

“I love you too, sunshine. You know that, right?”

“I mean, I-I thought so, but you didn’t exactly say it last night. Not in so many words.”

“Oh goddammit, I really do suck at this stuff,” Storm said, reeling Nathan in for another kiss, and another, and another. “I do, I love you so much. I didn’t know what it felt like until you came along. It drives me wild. You’re all I can think about, all I can focus on. All I want, forever. Do you really want my blood?”

Nathan’s nose scrunched. “Maybe. I don’t know how I feel about drinking blood.”

“It doesn’t have to be right this minute,” Storm promised, unable to take his hands off Nathan even when he leaned over to keep eating. “I’m just glad you’re considering it.”

Nathan nodded. “I’ve seen how this goes. I saw what happened to Alex and Luke. I... I want to solve this case. Once I’m sure the guild is safe from these possessors, I’ll leave. Disappear like Ira did, so we can be together.”

Storm blew out a breath. “I’m so happy to hear you say that, sunshine. But what about your house? They know where you live, don’t they?”

Nathan grimaced. “Yeah, they do. It’s listed on my paperwork with the guild. I can let it go; it’s just a house.”

“No.” Storm didn’t want him to give up the home he’d worked for. “You keep it. You can stay here for now, but keep the house. One day we’ll move into it together, when it’s safe.”

Nathan’s face twisted. “What if it’s never safe? There’s no way the guild will let us live in peace.”

Storm shrugged one shoulder. “Ira seems to think things will be better one day. Besides, Sloan can’t live forever. If you take my blood, one way or another, we’ll be free of them one day.”

Nathan softened, pushing the plate away and curling up against Storm’s side. “I’m glad I met you.”

Storm kissed the top of his head. “Me, too. Life would be so empty without you.”

* * *

Later that afternoon, they picked up food and headed toward the Rink. They didn’t really talk, but Storm sensed that something in their relationship had shifted. They were solid in a way they hadn’t been before. It didn’t matter that they hadn’t known each other all that long. They both understood that this was real, it was important, and it couldn’t be denied.

It left Storm feeling settled in a way he’d never experienced before. Like he’d been content before but never truly happy. He couldn’t wait for a time when Nathan no longer had to put on his guild ring and go to HQ. It wasn’t safe there for someone who loved a demon, and he wouldn’t rest until Nathan was free of them.

Just like last night, Nathan sat in the middle seat of Storm's truck, their legs lined up from hip to knee. Storm rested one hand on Nathan's thigh, delighted by the warmth of his skin through the denim. Bags of Chinese takeout sat in the floorboard on Nathan's other side.

When they came to a stop at a red light, Storm turned his head, lips brushing Nathan's ear. "Tell me you love me."

Nathan shivered, leaning harder against his side. "I love you."

"Tell me you want me."

"I always want you," Nathan whispered, turning his head to capture his lips.

Nathan's phone rang, and they reluctantly parted. Storm turned to watch the light as Nathan answered.

"Hello?"

"Captain Accardi, good afternoon. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time. I saw on the schedule that this is your day off, so I thought it might be a good time to contact you."

"Hi, Doctor Maxwell. It's a fine time. What can I do for you?"

"Oh, I'm calling because I tested that black pill you gave me. It had traces of sulfur, human bone, salt, wormwood and cedar. It looks like you were right; these pills are like miniature hex bags. I can only assume that if one ingests enough of them, the ingredients will accumulate in the body and allow a demon to take possession."

"Holy shit," Nathan whispered. Louder, he asked, "Thank you for letting me know,

Doc. Have you spoken with Commander Sloan yet?”

“ I have. He was... not as receptive as I would've liked. ”

Nathan paused, and Storm glanced over at his uncertain frown. “What do you mean?”

“ He insisted that you were helping with some ploy of the traitors’. I’m afraid he won’t listen to anything regarding these pills .”

“Even now that we have proof they’re causing the possessions?”

“ I can speak with him again later, try to make him see reason .”

“I... I don’t know if you should.”

Storm heard Maxwell’s sigh through the tinny speaker. “ I’ve done things I’m not proud of at this guild’s behest in the past, Captain. This time, people are dying. Someone needs to speak up. ”

Storm was dying to know what the doctor was talking about, and based on Nathan’s shocked look, he felt the same. Instead, he shook himself and said, “Okay. Just be careful. Don’t push too hard. I’m... I’m working with those ‘traitors’ to find the source of the pills now. I’ll do what I can out here to put a stop to it.”

“ Good. Do what you can, and I’ll do the same. Good luck, Captain. God be with you. ”

“And with you.”

Nathan hung up and blew out a breath. “Okay. Looks like he confirmed what we already knew. Those pills are what’s killing people. Lilith is helping the distributor.

We just need to find out where they're coming from."

"We'll figure it out," Storm promised, squeezing his leg.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 19

Nathan

Nathan was starting to think some of the guys lived at the Rink. It was like they never left. Everyone was already there when they arrived. Zachary bounded over to take the food from them, and rather against his will, Nathan's gaze found Alex's, who flushed and ducked his head, scratching at the back of his neck.

"So about last night," Alex started, and Talon laughed.

"Whatever happened last night?" Shadrach asked, curious and teasing. He glanced between them, and Nathan's face burned with embarrassment.

"Shadrach," Storm growled.

Shadrach blinked innocently. "I just asked a question."

"You asked it in an annoying way," Storm said. "What have they already told you?"

"Nothing at all, of course," Shadrach replied.

"They told us about the pill you had to take," Wolf said, shooting Shadrach an exasperated look. "And the, uh, side effects."

"Oh God," Nathan groaned, massaging the bridge of his nose.

“I imagine both of you said that quite a bit last night,” Shadrach remarked.

Malachi barked out a laugh—and then covered his mouth when Luke shot him a halfhearted glare.

“Look,” Alex said, “things—happened. It’s not a big deal. We got the answers we went there for. Or, I guess Talon and Storm did.”

“You were there, little bird,” Talon said graciously. “You can include yourselves in that.”

Nathan wanted to sink into the floor. “We didn’t do much interrogating.”

“Lilith likely wouldn’t have answered any of your questions anyway,” Talon said.

“Let’s pass out the food before we get into this,” Luke suggested.

Nathan picked out a carton of chicken lo mein for himself and sat in one of the folding metal chairs in the loose circle at the back of the room near the sofa, which had seen better days. Storm grabbed another chair and dragged it right next to his, crossing his ankles and stretching one arm out along Nathan’s backrest.

It was strange to be allowed to touch Storm without fear of being condemned here, like none of them cared at all that Nathan was sleeping with a demon. But then, why would they? Strange to be able to accept these comforting, casual touches as easily as the others accepted the same from their own demonic partners. Was this what it would be like all the time, when he no longer had the guild to contend with? Could he love Storm out in the open and damn anyone who hated them for it?

It seemed like a dream.

When they were all seated—Alex, Shadrach and Ira on the sofa with Angela and Zachary cross-legged on the floor and everyone else in folding chairs—Nathan cleared his throat, picking at the noodles in his carton with his chopsticks.

“Maxwell called on our way over here and told me he finished his analysis on the pill I gave him.”

“And?” Luke asked, grimacing as though in anticipation of the answer.

Nathan nodded. “The contents matched what was found in the boy’s stomach. Bone dust, sulfur, salt, wormwood, and cedar. He agreed that it seems likely enough doses would allow for a demonic possession, which just confirms what we learned at In Extremis.”

“Who in the hell is Lilith’s lover?” Storm asked. “I didn’t even know she had a lover.”

“Whoever it is, she’s been keeping them a secret for a long time,” Wolf said. “I had no idea, either.”

“I’ve heard rumors,” Shadrach said, and all eyes turned toward him. He did a double-take at the sudden attention.

“Who is it?” Talon asked.

“I don’t know his name. Some kalmach.”

“A kalmach?” Talon repeated. “Really? I didn’t know any of them were topside.”

“They weren’t, last I heard. If one is now, it’s recent.”

“Kalmachs are shapeshifters, aren’t they?” Alex asked.

Talon nodded, then moved his head from side to side in a so-so manner. “Kind of. Not in the sense that they can look like anyone. They have a human form and a demonic one, and they can transform between the two.”

“Their demonic one has wings,” Shadrach added cheerfully. “I always wondered what that was like.”

“I didn’t think a kalmach would get involved in something like this. They usually keep to their own kind,” Talon said.

“If Lilith has cozied up to one, their loyalty may be divided,” Shadrach suggested.

“If we had a name, we could summon him,” Wolf said.

“She wasn’t stupid enough to give us a name,” Storm said.

“She didn’t even give us his species,” Talon pointed out.

“How do we find this guy, then?” Luke asked.

“I’d like to go back to the campus,” Nathan said. “There have been two verified attacks on campus. David Simms and the boy who attacked my squad and me during our patrol.”

“Maybe those two just so happened to be regulars at In Extremis,” Talon argued, albeit lightly.

“Or maybe they’re flooding the campus with drugs to get as many victims as they can. It would be stupid for their only victims to be coming and going from the club.

That puts a target on Lilith's business. We didn't actually track a single victim back to the club, either. We just went there on the off-chance that a halfling knew something because of their connection to the supernatural."

"True," Alex agreed.

"Both of the victims we know of were college students."

"So we could ask around and maybe find someone who's selling," Alex said. "Maybe talk to David Simms's roommate."

"It's not a bad idea," Malachi said. "If these pills get you high and horny all at once, I can see why they'd appeal to the college crowd. They try them once, not realizing what they actually do, and keep coming back for more until there's enough in their system for the demon to take hold."

"And somebody's making money off of this shit, too," Zachary said suddenly, his mouth twisted in distaste. "If these people like the high and go back for more, they're definitely buying from somebody. Nothing like that could be free. It'd make people too suspicious."

"We need to find out who's selling it, then," Alex said. "If they're selling on campus, there's a trail. We just have to find it. Zach, you and I can go to the college campus and ask around for the first victim's roommate."

"Whoa, wait," Talon interrupted. "What do you mean, you and Zach?"

Alex rolled his eyes, fighting back a smile. "Talon, it'll be broad daylight, and we're just talking to his roommate. We're not storming the lab where the pills are made."

"Take someone who's actually seen combat," Talon said.

“Ouch,” Zachary deadpanned. “You guys are the ones who won’t let me patrol with you yet.”

“I’ve seen combat,” Alex said with an exasperated laugh. “And the rest of these guys are too old to blend in on a college campus.”

“Ouch,” Ira repeated.

“Yeah, fuck you,” Luke said without heat, his mouth full, and Malachi leaned over with a grin to kiss his shoulder.

Nathan snorted out a laugh. “No offense taken here. I feel every bit of thirty-three, thank you very much.”

Alex gestured gratefully at him. “See? I’m twenty-three—although technically my body is still twenty-two, thanks to your blood. Zach’s eighteen. We’ll blend right in, because we’re the right age for college students.”

Talon opened his mouth to speak, but Nathan beat him to it.

“I’ll come along,” he offered. “I’m not passing for a college student, so you two can visit the roommate without me. But, this way I can have your backs and report our findings back to HQ.”

A low rumble drew Nathan’s attention to Storm, who was scowling at him. Who knew demons were so protective? He patted Storm’s leg reassuringly.

Talon studied him quietly for a moment, and then nodded. “Fine.”

* * *

Nathan offered to drive and even stopped to get them all coffee on the way to the college campus. Storm's bright smile from this morning lingered in his mind as he ordered a white chocolate mocha at the drive-thru window. Every sweet sip reminded him of the demon he'd left behind at the Rink.

"So, I know we're pretending to be students," Zachary said from the backseat, sucking on the straw of his frappuccino, "but what do we tell them about you, Nate? Are you an older student? A TA?"

Alex, in the passenger seat, shot Nathan a thoughtful look. "If anybody asks, you're my older brother who's come to visit."

Nathan pressed a hand to his chest as though wounded. "Really making me feel my age, huh?"

Alex barked out a laugh. "I'm not responsible for however you feel, Cap. I'm just a frat guy hanging out between classes."

He shook his head, chuckling. He eased the car into a parking spot near one of the regal brick buildings. "All right, whatever. Where is this guy's roommate, anyway?"

"Well, David Simms's obituary was in the local paper. It mentioned that his roommate was somebody named Jace Gellar. I couldn't find his exact room number, but his social media mentioned the dorm hall he lives in. I figure if we head over there, it should be fairly easy to ask around for him," Alex explained as they all fell into step together.

Nathan smiled to himself. He'd forgotten how good Alex was at his job. He'd always been a smart and capable young man. Blinded by the need for revenge, maybe, but even that was understandable. Nathan didn't have any close family he would want to avenge like that, but when he thought of something happening to Storm, it made him

want to do terrible things.

They fell into step together, pretending they belonged there amongst the carefully landscaped campus and carefree students passing them on the wide walkways. No one gave them a second look.

It occurred to him that Alex was in a uniquely similar situation as him, and if he wanted to learn more, here was the perfect person to ask. He glanced over, wondering where to begin, and Alex caught his gaze.

“What?” Alex asked.

He opened his mouth to speak—and paused when he saw Zachary, on Alex’s other side, glancing between them with idle interest.

Zachary smiled crookedly. “Don’t stop on my account. I hear all kinds of things at the Rink. I’m sure nothing you say will surprise me. I mean, unless it’s something private between you two. I don’t want to pry. I just mean if it’s scary stuff about demons, you’re probably not going to horrify me.”

“It’s—not scary stuff about demons, no,” Nathan hedged.

Zachary giggled. “Oh. That. I mean, they feel each other up all the time. They think Angie and I don’t notice, but we do.”

“What ?” Alex squeaked.

Zachary threw his head back with a laugh. “Yeah, man! Your demon guys aren’t subtle at all. Most of the time they watch you guys like they want to eat you.” He shrugged. “It’s fine. My, uh, my dad’s been alone since my mom died. It’s kind of nice seeing some examples of happy relationships. Healthy is a little debatable, but

you guys make it work.”

Nathan didn't quite know what to make of that. In truth, it spoke volumes that Zachary and Angela, kids who'd never been exposed to the supernatural until they met the Rink crew, felt comfortable enough around them all to stick around and even allowed the ex-paladins to train them. Before he'd met them himself, Nathan never would've guessed that demons would be any sort of worthwhile role models to children. It sounded ridiculous on paper, and yet the demons and humans alike often made sure the kids had dinner and gave them rides home when needed.

Alex cast Nathan an overwhelmed look. “Right. Okay. So, Nate, care to share now?”

Nathan snorted. “I was going to ask if it was weird for you when you met Talon. Did you feel the same pull toward him that they all claim they felt toward us?”

Alex bobbed his head sagely. “I did. It totally consumed me. I started having dreams about him—which I learned later was because he can dreamwalk.”

“No, really? I didn't know they could do that.”

“Leviathans can, yeah. I thought I was losing my mind for a while.” He grimaced. “Talon didn't handle it the best, to be honest. He didn't want to give me a chance to push him away. I tried for a while, but I was drawn right back in. It was like no matter how much I tried to stop thinking about him, it only made me want him more.”

Invasive dreams aside, Nathan felt similar for Storm. Like staying away from him would be agony. Hell, it had been agony, and he'd only made it a day.

“Why is it like that?” he asked, although he knew Alex couldn't answer.

“Malachi said once that he thinks it might be something about their physiology. Well,

he said that would be his guess if it was only halflings. He thought maybe there was some part of the halflings that recognized something in the humans they chose. But since Talon was never human, it's hard to say. Maybe it's still true. Maybe something about us just calls to them. Maybe it's all a part of some grand design, like Ira says. He says we're meant to be a bridge between demons and humans. That we'll protect both."

Nathan's head swirled. "Does he say how that comes to be?"

Alex smiled ruefully. "No. He's fuzzy on the details. But he's adamant that all of this is supposed to happen."

"Am I meant..." Nathan stopped, uncertain whether he wanted to say the words aloud.

Alex stopped, and Zachary stopped a beat later, watching them patiently. Alex's calm blue eyes were far too knowing, piercing into the depths of everything Nathan couldn't say.

"Are you meant... to leave the guild?" Alex guessed. "Like we did?"

Nathan swallowed hard. Nodded.

Alex smiled, a small, pursed thing filled with sympathy. "I think you already know the answer to that, brother. That's why you're asking, isn't it?"

Nathan's eyes burned. He ducked his head. "Yeah. You're right. And—" he sniffed hard, angry with himself for doing this here, when they had a job to do, "I'm sorry for my part in what happened to you, Alex."

He shook his head kindly. "I would've chosen to leave on my own," Alex said. "The

truth is, I'd already been considering it. You guys just beat me to it."

"Still. It was wrong of me. I should've done things differently."

Alex tsked . "I'm pretty sure Ira would say you're doing things exactly as you're supposed to."

That held far too many implications for Nathan to parse right now. He was meant to kill that boy? He was meant to be torn between the guild and his demon? He was meant to betray everything he'd been raised to believe about demons and Hell? Truthfully, he didn't even feel guilty about his changing belief system. An overwhelming part of him wanted to leave the guild, because it meant being with Storm.

"I don't even know how to do what comes next," he admitted. "I know I'll have to leave it all behind. I can't have both. That's been made clear."

Alex inclined his head. "Yeah. With the guild, you'll have to scorch the earth behind you. Pick up and move. They know where you live. They pay your salary. They own your car. Your laptop and cell phone are all guild-issued. It's all got to go."

Yes, he'd assumed as much. "Storm already told me I could move in with him."

Alex beamed at him. "That's good, right?"

"I think so. It's just all moving so fast. I didn't expect any of this. Falling for a demon, being faced with the choice of walking away from everything I've ever known."

Alex nodded. "It's big. But believe me, it's worth it."

Nathan believed that. He'd never been happier than when he was with Storm, and being able to stay with him would be worth it.

Being with Storm was forever. He knew that from the very first kiss.

"You don't think the guild is suspicious about your relationship, do you?"

"No, I don't think so. Sloan's given me a time limit on working with you, but I'm taking advantage of it while I can." He straightened, and Alex's hand fell away. "Speaking of that, his goodwill might last longer if I actually bring him some useful information regarding this case." If he could find more evidence of the pills' existence, maybe together he and Maxwell could convince Sloan.

Alex nodded curtly. "Let's get a move on then."

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Chapter 20

Nathan

After some asking around near the dormitory, a smoker lingering near the entrance directed them up to the third floor. The hallways were wide and long, with pale tile floor and bare brick walls. Nathan waved Alex and Zachary ahead, as they could pass for students who lived on a different floor.

“Fake names, yeah?” Alex murmured to Zachary, who nodded. Then he glanced back at Nathan. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Nathan and Zachary said in unison.

Alex knocked on the door. Nathan worried, for a moment, that Jace wouldn’t be in right now. It was the middle of the week, after all. He could very well be in class or at lunch. Maybe they should’ve waited and come in the evening.

But then the door opened, and a lanky young man with curly blond hair and brown eyes blinked at them in surprise.

“Uh. Hi. Can I help you?”

“You’re Jace, right?” Alex said. “I’m Chris, and this is my roommate...”

“Pedro,” Zachary said, sticking out a hand for Jace to shake, which he did in consternation.

“We heard about David, man, and we just wanted to come and give our condolences,” Alex continued, affecting a sympathetic wince.

“Oh.” Jace deflated. “Yeah. Thanks, dude. Do you guys live in the building?” His gaze lingered on Nathan, the obvious outlier.

“Yeah, we’re upstairs,” Alex said. “Oh, sorry. This is my big brother, Will. He came up to visit this week after I told him what happened.”

Jace relaxed. “Oh, yeah, I feel you. I went home over the weekend. Just had to get away, y’know? You guys want to come in for a sec? How’d you know David?” He turned away, as trusting as a kitten, and invited three strange men into his small dorm with him.

It was a basic space. A double-sided desk with a privacy divider separated the two sides of the room. Only one bed had blankets on it. The other had been stripped bare, and the wardrobe built into the wall was open, displaying empty drawers and one lone coat hanger. The odds of them finding evidence of David’s drug usage diminished greatly without any of his things left behind.

A strange, herbal smell lingered in the air, despite the window being open. Had Jace been burning incense?

Zachary glanced at Nathan, his gaze calculating. He didn’t understand why until Zachary spoke.

“David, he was a great guy. He introduced me to my supplier.”

Nathan’s gut lurched. What if that was too forward? What if it gave them away?

But Jace brightened. “No shit? You know Perry? He’s a good dude. He keeps some

addys on hand for me when exams are coming up.”

“Yeah, yeah, he’s great,” Zachary agreed, smiling broadly. Then he sobered, leaning in conspiratorially. “Listen, though. David told me he got something new he wanted me to try sometime. Did he say anything to you about it? I’ve been real paranoid it might’ve had something to do with what happened to him, y’know?”

Jace’s eyes widened, and Nathan realized they were red. Everything clicked, quite suddenly. Jace was a stoner. Zachary recognized it right away. Nathan, on the other hand, had never tried any kind of drug. Never even been around them, sheltered at the guild as he was. So that’s what that smell was.

“Yeah, you’re talking about those black pills, right? I think he got those from Andy.” He glanced around, as though someone might be able to hear them through the walls. “I’d stay away from that shit, man. Sounds like it’ll really fuck you up if you take too much.”

“Yeah, yeah, man, we’ll be careful,” Zachary said. “Any chance you could hook me up with Andy? I just want to try it once.”

Jace hesitated. It was as good as waving a giant red flag that the black pills were dangerous, in Nathan’s opinion.

“We may not even buy any,” Alex said. “We just want to see what they cost, see if the risk is worth it.”

“They’re not cheap, that’s for sure,” Jace said, relaxing somewhat. “Okay, fine, but you didn’t hear it from me. His name’s Andrew Weston. I meet him sometimes outside the science lab, about—” he glanced at the clock, “twenty minutes from now, actually. He comes out of lab three-thirteen. Shaggy blond hair, wire-frame glasses. He carries a green backpack.”

Nathan had to consciously keep himself from outwardly reacting, and he was proud of Alex and especially Zachary for doing the same. Alex had more training, but Zachary was still very new to this business. He was a natural.

“Thanks, man,” Zachary said as they all herded toward the door. “Listen, we’ve got to run. You’re right, you should probably avoid those pills. Sounds like they’re pretty dangerous. Stick to the pot, if you need it. And just do me a favor, make sure you’re drinking plenty of water when you take those adderall around exam time, okay? We’ve got to run, thanks, bye!”

Beneath the sun-dappled shade of the trees outside the dormitory, Alex clapped Zachary on the back and said, “Wow, that was great! You knew exactly how to get him to open up.”

Zachary didn’t quite smile, one corner of his mouth lifting with a rueful shrug. “It was nothing.”

“Not to us,” Nathan said kindly. “You were a big help in there.”

A frown settled over Zachary’s rich brown eyes, and Alex and Nathan exchanged a glance of concern. There was something more to this than Zachary was saying, but neither of them knew whether to push for details. Nathan wasn’t sure it was even his place to ask, since he barely knew Zachary and wasn’t part of the Rink group. He gave Alex a little nudge and nodded toward the boy.

Alex sidled closer. “You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to,” he said. “But we’re also happy to listen, if you want to talk about it.”

Zachary’s mouth twisted like he was warring internally. “Okay. The truth is, I used to deal.”

That was a surprise. Nathan might've guessed he at least used, given how much Zachary knew about the drug scene, but Zachary seemed very young to have been a dealer.

"My mom was an addict," Zachary went on, looking into the distance rather than at either of them. "She couldn't hold down a job, and my parents argued all the time about money stuff. She used to ask me to find her drugs a lot, so I knew who all the local dealers were. When things got desperate enough, I started selling to make enough money to pay for her habit. And that was... that was what killed her."

Nathan's stomach rolled with sympathy. He'd tried to do the right thing, albeit with less than honorable means, and it backfired in the worst way.

"Aw, hell, kid," Alex said, which was ironic given that he wasn't that much older than Zachary. "That's why things are so tough at home, huh?"

Zachary shook his head bitterly and shrugged one shoulder. "Dad hasn't been the same since it happened. He hasn't outright said it, but I know he blames me. I can feel it in the way he looks at me. He holds me at a distance, too. And Angie, she's so great. She's in my corner, every damn time. But she made me promise I'd never touch another drug again in my life, and I swore I wouldn't. I'll keep it if it's the last thing I ever do."

Warmth filled Nathan for this boy he barely knew, who was stronger than plenty of grown men he'd met over the years.

"I think that sounds like a fine promise." His voice was gruff to his own ears.

Zachary fidgeted. "Thanks. I just want to do right by her. She deserves better than what I've done to our family."

There was a whole host of things to unpack in that statement, and Nathan took a breath to lay them all out right there beside the dormitory. But Zachary shook himself, packing away the guilt he carried and giving them a resolute look.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to get us off-track. We should head over to the science lab before Weston gets out. We don’t have much time.”

Nathan looked to Alex. He wanted to say more, and he could tell Alex did, too. But Zachary was right. They didn’t have much time to book it across the campus if they wanted to find Andrew Weston. With reluctance, they both nodded and fell into step together on the sidewalk.

“What do we do when we find him?” Alex asked. “Like, what’s our play? We’re buyers?”

“That’s what Gellar believed,” Nathan replied. “I see no reason to deviate, if that’s a believable lie.”

By the time they arrived at the science lab, a three-story brick building halfway across the campus, people were already filing out of the building, fanning out in different directions as soon as they hit the sidewalk.

“Oh shit, are we late? Is this his class?” Alex asked.

Nathan scanned the crowd, hoping they weren’t too late.

“There,” Zachary said. “Coming through the door. Shaggy blond, glasses, green backpack.”

Nathan grunted. If they weren’t taking Zachary out on patrols yet, they needed to rectify that fast. The kid was a natural in the field. Sharp eyes and smart as a whip.

Andrew turned right when he reached the sidewalk's intersection in front of the building, and the trio lurched into movement.

"Whoa, hey! Andrew, right?" Alex said, falling into step with him. Zachary took Andrew's other side, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

Andrew glanced between them. "Uh, yeah, that's me. Do I know you?"

"No, but we have a mutual friend. Jace Gellar."

Andrew nodded, keeping his expression cool. "Right, yeah. I know Jace."

"He told us we could find you here," Zachary said. "See, we're looking for something fun. A particular kind of fun, y'know?"

Andrew glanced over his shoulder at Nathan, following behind them. "The three of you?"

"Yep," Alex said. "That's my big brother. He's visiting from Oregon, and he likes to have fun, too."

"Uh-huh." Andrew's gaze swept up and down Nathan's form.

He'd done his best to dress down, in old jeans and a plain T-shirt, but he couldn't do anything about his military-style haircut. If this kid suspected he was a narc, their mission would be blown before they could find out what they needed. He ducked his head, scratching absently at his jaw. Would it be better to back off, or would that only make him seem more suspicious?

Before he could decide, Andrew stopped, turning fully to face him. His eyes were wide.

“Paladin,” he said, and Nathan realized his eyes were glued to his guild ring. He hadn’t expected anyone on a college campus to recognize it.

He took a breath to speak—but Alex moved first, grabbing Andrew by the arm. “Don’t move,” he said in a low voice. “Don’t run. We just have a few questions.”

Andrew jerked his arm, but Alex held fast. “Let me go,” he hissed under his breath. He didn’t want to draw attention to them, either, it seemed.

Nathan eased closer. “You can answer our questions about the black pills, or I can take you back with me to the guild and let you answer our questions there. What’ll it be?”

Andrew’s upper lip curled. “I’m not telling you shit.”

Alex and Zachary looked at Nathan, waiting.

“Let’s take him back to my car, then. I’m sure Sloan would like a word. I, for one, am very curious how you know about the paladins.” Knowing about the guild meant he knew exactly what he was selling. The only question that remained was how and why .

Andrew’s shifty brown eyes darted around them, but he seemed to recognize there was nowhere he could run that they couldn’t follow. With gritted teeth, he let them lead him across campus. Alex kept a hand fisted in his shirt the whole time.

When they reached Nathan’s car, he glanced around to make sure the area was deserted, and then popped the trunk and forced Andrew inside it.

“Hey, you can’t do this! Let me out!” he hollered, his voice muffled through the metal.

Alex grimaced. “Please don’t get pulled over.”

Nathan nodded seriously. “The slowest and safest I’ll ever drive, I swear. Can you call Talon to come and get you guys? I’d rather not have to make any detours on my way to HQ.”

“Absolutely.” Alex brought his phone to his ear and turned away to talk to Talon.

Nathan set Andrew’s green backpack on the trunk’s lid and unzipped it. “Might as well see what he’s got in here.” In the front pocket, he found his cell phone. He turned it off and handed it to Zachary. “See if you can get into that.” A lot of it was actual class stuff. Books, notebooks, a binder filled with chemistry notes. Beneath all of that, there was a hidden pocket in the lining of the backpack, which he only noticed because there was something hard in the uneven padding. When he pried it open, he found multiple baggies of black pills.

“Well, well, well,” he said, tugging a handful of baggies out. “Look at this.”

Talon appeared beside them, squinting in the sunlight. His gaze found Alex first, and he laid a hand on his shoulder. Then he noticed the bag of pills in Nathan’s hand.

“Holy shit,” he declared.

Zachary said, “Depending on what he sells those for, this could be hundreds of dollars worth of pills, you guys.”

“Where’s the guy?” Talon asked.

Nathan thumped the trunk, and Andrew hollered again.

Talon barked out a laugh. “Nice. We could bring him back to the Rink, question him

there.”

Nathan shook his head. “I’d rather take him to HQ, honestly. We have a jail that can hold him, and I need him to prove to Sloan that the pills are the real culprit behind the possessions.”

Talon inclined his head. “Fair enough, I guess. I’m fine with washing our hands of this mess and letting the guild handle it.”

“As long as the killing stops, I don’t care who questions the guy,” Alex agreed.

Nathan feared that was too optimistic, but he couldn’t deny he hoped for the same. There was a very good chance that Andrew Weston was just one of many dealers on campus, and they may not be done rooting out the problem. He just wanted to put this danger behind them once and for all. Then, and only then, would he feel they were all safe enough to focus on his personal wants. It wouldn’t feel right to leave the guild while it was still in danger.

* * *

To say that Sloan was displeased would’ve been an understatement—one Nathan admitted he hadn’t foreseen.

“You kidnapped a man from the university, drove him here in the trunk of your car and locked him up in the dungeon before you saw fit to inform me about any of it?”

The clock on the wall behind Sloan’s head ticked in the silence. He didn’t really want Nathan to answer. The last two times he’d tried, Sloan had ordered him to shut up. It was probably best to just let him run out of steam at this point. Nathan would calmly make his case when Sloan was finished with his tirade.

“What if you were seen? What if you were pulled over? You could’ve gotten arrested—you still could be, if someone saw you and reported it!”

Nathan calmly picked up Weston’s backpack. He’d planned to wait until Sloan was finished yelling, but it appeared that might be a while.

“What—what are you doing?” Sloan asked.

Nathan opened up the backpack and tugged the secret compartment open, laying it on Sloan’s desk and shaking dozens of baggies of black pills out onto his desk. Sloan raised his hands as though to avoid touching them, his anger giving way to shock.

“He’s distributing these on campus. People are dying because of him,” Nathan said. “He recognized my ring right away, called me a paladin. He knows who we are, he knows what these pills do, and he’s selling them anyway. He’s helping to kill people in the most horrific way I’ve ever seen, Commander. As far as I’m concerned, he’s no better than the monsters themselves. All we need to do is find out why he’s helping the demons with this and find out where he’s getting them.” He carded his hands through his hair. It’d been a long day already, and it was only going to be longer. “He knew better than to struggle, because he didn’t want to draw attention to himself while he was carrying these. He walked with us off the campus and to my car. Yeah, I gave him a little push into the trunk, but I parked far away and there was no one around. Hawk took Weston’s cell phone with him to see if he could crack the passcode. He’ll let me know if he’s successful.”

Sloan’s gaze sharpened at Alex’s name. “You don’t think we could’ve done that?” he asked.

“Yes, but I figured if anyone were tracking the phone, you’d rather they find Hawk’s people and not the guild.” His lies to Sloan were piling up these days. He’d actually delegated that role to Zachary because the kid seemed the most tech-savvy. He didn’t

think mentioning Zachary or his sister would do anyone any favors. The last thing they needed was Sloan thinking the Rink team was actively recruiting. He might start to see them as a more immediate threat if he thought their numbers were growing.

Sloan nodded, leaning back in his chair. He leveled a pensive look at the pills strewn across his desk, then met Nathan's eyes. "Your methods aside, you've rooted out a serious problem and made great strides in this case. We've never held a civilian here in our dungeon, and frankly we don't have a protocol to follow for this. I'll send word to the council. I'd like their input on how we proceed. The good news is that we reinforced our wards after the incident with Hawk and Morgan's demons showing up outside our gate. We're effectively hidden from all supernatural creatures. As long as Weston is behind our walls, he'll be hidden from whoever he's working with, if they're a demon themselves."

"I have reason to believe that is the case, sir, yes. The outcasts' demons said they've been asking around in their circles and heard rumors of a demon rallying the possessors. We have to assume that's the one making and distributing these pills." Another white lie, but telling Sloan he'd gone to In Extremis without express permission would only get him in more trouble.

Sloan nodded. "Yes, agreed." He picked up his desk phone. "I'll assemble the council. In the meantime, I want you down at the dungeon. Keep an eye on him. I don't want him finding a way out like the prophet did."

That was unlikely, given that someone had let Ira out, but he wasn't dumb enough to say as much out loud. He gave Sloan a crisp nod and turned away.

It was edging toward evening already, and he doubted the council would come to a decision about Weston any time soon. His odds of getting home at a decent hour were looking slim. With a sigh, he took his phone out as he made his way down the long hall toward the stairs at the back of the building.

Looks like I'm going to be here a while. We've got a prisoner.

Storm

I heard. The group chat has been blowing up.

Group chat?

Storm

Hang on, I'll add you.

Nathan looked away as he went down the stairs and out into the warm afternoon sun. He waved at a couple of students jogging past in workout clothes, and when he made it to the isolated dungeon—a lonely brick building set well away from the rest of the compound—his phone was repeatedly chiming with incoming messages.

“Geez,” he murmured, raising it and opening the new texts. It was impossible to read over the old texts and keep up with the new ones, so he just picked up with the newest ones as they came in.

Unknown

Would you just tell us if you found something?

Zachary

Gee, Shadrach, if you want to know so bad, why don't you just come to the Rink?

Talon

That would mean admitting he was wrong about something.

Alex

Ignore Shadrach.

Did Zach get into the phone?

Alex

Hi Nate.

Luke

Welcome to the chaos

Ira

Yes, he did, but he's been distracted from telling us anything.

Zachary

It's not my fault I was baited by a demon.

Unknown

It's your fault for falling for it, though.

Nathan added Shadrach's number to his phone. Might as well have everyone's.

So?

Wolf

what he said

Zachary

His password was 666666.

Talon

Oh, so he's a genius.

Ira

Clearly.

Zachary

He's got some texts from an unknown number. It's all nonsense though. Random numbers. Maybe a code of some kind.

Alex

He's right. We can start trying out different things, see if anything makes sense.

Wait, you're together and also texting each other?

Alex

It's just Talon, Zach, Angie and me at the Rink right now. We're filling in the rest of you. We'll keep the phone here and let you take a look the next time you're here.

Good deal. Sloan's meeting with the council about Weston. No idea how long that'll take.

Luke

They don't make decisions fast.

No they don't. I'll probably be here into the night. Or longer. They've been known to adjourn when it gets too late and reassemble in the morning. This could take days.

Talon

Then why don't you get started?

Nathan blinked at the phone. He could practically hear the demon's voice in his head, feel that dark, penetrating gaze on his face.

Get started how?

Talon

Are they preventing you from speaking to the captive?

He glanced back at the door over his shoulder.

No

Talon

Then go get some answers.

There was a heavy pause while Nathan considered those words. It would be against the rules, certainly, but he'd done plenty of rule-breaking lately, hadn't he? What if he could get answers while the council deliberated? Weston had been compliant enough in getting there. Maybe he'd be willing to talk. As long as Nathan didn't get too close to his cell or, God forbid, open it, no one would probably care if he went inside. And the sooner they solved this case, the sooner he could take off his ring for good.

His phone chimed again.

Talon

Alex tells me that's against protocol. But you want answers too, don't you?

Storm

Don't let him tempt you into doing anything that would turn them against you, Nate. Can't believe you're making me into the damn voice of reason here, Talon.

Talon

I just want to find out what's going on. If they'd brought that guy here I'd take matters into my own hands. They've got him behind that goddamn wall now, and I can't ask those questions myself.

It's fine. Talon's right. I'll go see if he's feeling chatty. I can't open his cell or force him to talk without council approval. But I'll do what I can.

Storm

I'm headed to the Rink. Might as well drink while we wait.

Wolf

We'll meet you there.

Luke

Halfway there now. Mal's driving.

Alex

If you get a drink, you put a twenty in the liquor jar. We're running low, and we're not funding your collective drinking habit.

Nathan set his phone to silent so he wouldn't hear a ding every time one of them responded and slipped inside the cool, dark dungeon. The stone staircase descended down and opened up in the main hall. A shuffling sound on the far left alerted him to Weston before he actually saw him. The boy approached the bars and peered through them.

"Oh, it's you," he said dismissively.

Nathan strolled to a stop in front of the bars. "Yeah. It's me."

"What are you doing here?" Weston leaned against the stone wall beside the bars, folding his arms and cocking his hip out like he hadn't a care in the world.

He was shockingly calm for someone who'd been kidnapped from the campus and held in a literal dungeon. Most people would at least be crying, maybe begging to be let go. But not him.

"You knew I was a paladin," Nathan said. "You know who we are. You know why

you're here."

Weston shrugged. "So what if I do?"

"So what?" he repeated. "What do you mean, 'so what?' You know those pills you're selling are killing people. You know what they do."

Weston looked away, shrugging again.

"Why? Why are you doing this? It can't just be for the money. You could sell regular pills and make money."

"Why do you do what you do?" Weston asked. "Why did you become a paladin?"

Nathan blinked. "I was raised here. I was taught that we needed to take up arms against the forces of evil and protect mankind."

Weston snorted out a laugh. "Do you hear yourself? You sound ridiculous."

"Do I? Those little pills of yours have been eviscerating people. Seems pretty evil to me."

Weston sighed through his teeth. "They weren't supposed to try breaking through so soon. He told them to wait. They're impatient, you see. If they'd listened, you never would've found me. By the time you knew what was going on, it would've already been over."

"But what's the point?" He couldn't tame the frustration in his voice. "Why are you doing this at all?"

Weston smiled, eerie and calm. "Who decides what's evil?"

Nathan frowned. “What?”

“Who gets to decide who lives and dies? You paladins, you say you’re fighting evil. Who decides that?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but the words stuck in his throat. Not all demons were evil. He knew that now. Saying that every creature from Hell deserved to die, as he’d been taught, left a sour feeling in his gut. Storm didn’t deserve to die. Neither did any of the other demons from the Rink that he’d met.

Weston’s expression cleared with understanding. “You see it, too.”

He gulped hard. “See what?”

“The hypocrisy.”

“Why do you care what the paladins do?” Nathan countered. “Why is this the battle you’re choosing to fight?”

“I fight for the same reason you do, paladin. Faith in a higher power. I just serve your sworn enemy.”

Nathan’s stomach knotted. “You serve... Hell? You worship Satan?”

“Actually, I serve Amon.” He laughed, throwing his head back. “He’s incredible. Everything has gone exactly as he planned. I can’t believe it was so easy.”

“What?” He was missing something. Something important.

Weston leaned closer, a wicked grin stretching his mouth wide. “He knew you’d find me. He knew you’d bring me here.”

Nathan opened his mouth to speak when a deafening boom pierced the air. The ground shook, and Nathan threw a hand out to steady himself on the gritty bars of Weston's cage. Almost in the same moment, the lights flickered out.

"What the hell?" Nathan whispered. He fumbled his phone from his pocket and turned on the flashlight, glimpsing Weston's smug grin as he wheeled around.

"They're here," Weston said. "Just like he promised."

"Amon? Amon is here?" He turned to look at Weston, his face cut by the shadows of the bars. "They can't find the compound. It's warded."

Weston reached up, unbuttoning the top half of his shirt. His chest was scarred with some kind of pattern, and against his better judgment Nathan stepped closer to look at it, horror crawling up his spine. Sigils were branded into his skin in a circular pattern.

"It's a tracking spell," Weston explained. "You led them right to this place. And now you're all gonna burn."

Nathan's mind raced. "The wall is still warded. They can't cross it."

Weston leaned toward the bars. "They can if something breaks the wall."

The wall. The explosion. If the wall was compromised, they were all in danger. The staff, the prophets, the children .

"Oh, God." He raced for the door.

Weston's ringing laughter followed him down the hall. "It's too late, paladin! Amon is coming! And he's bringing the fruit of our labors!"

Chapter 21

Storm

No amount of alcohol could dampen the sting of Nathan's absence. Storm sighed as he took another sip of whatever Wolf had poured him at the snack bar—some new mixture that combined all the hard liquors they'd stocked here. It wasn't as good as the blood-tainted liquor they used to drink at In Extremis, but it was what the humans could abide keeping in stock.

They hadn't heard from Nathan since he said he was going in to question the dealer, and Storm knew they were all hanging around to see what he said. For all their sakes, Storm hoped the dealer cracked easy. He just wanted this to be over so he could focus on his human.

With a sigh, he drained his cup and stood for a refill. Ira was sitting on a stool at the snack bar, and he gave Storm a knowing look. Storm set his cup on the glass countertop for Wolf and met Ira's smug gaze.

"What?" he asked.

Ira smiled at him. "I take it things are going well between you two."

Storm couldn't stop his mouth from curling into a smile. "Very well."

Alex joined them, rounding the snack bar to grab a bottle of water from the fridge. "Yeah, I had no idea Nate was even gay—or bi?" He shrugged one shoulder. "I mean,

it's not like any of us had healthy dating lives while we were with the guild, I guess, so maybe it's not that strange."

"He's not," Storm said. "Or—he wasn't. Isn't?" He shook himself. "He'd never been with a man before me." There was no hiding his satisfaction, and Wolf rumbled out a chuckle.

"I'm sure you showed him everything there was to know," Wolf said, sliding his glass back over.

"Well. Some. This stupid case has been getting in the way."

"With any luck, it'll be over soon," Alex said. "Has he mentioned, uh, what his plans are after that? We all know dating a demon and working for the guild never works."

"He knows he'll have to decide eventually. His time with them is limited, and when he's ready to leave, he'll come live with me. We talked about it a little already." Storm couldn't hide his smile. "I'm just glad he's choosing me."

Wolf smirked, looking at Ira and gesturing at Storm. "Do we all sound so smitten?"

"Yes," Ira and Alex said in unison.

Talon strolled over, draping an arm around Alex's shoulders. "What are we talking about?"

"How head over heels all you demons are for us," Alex said, leaning in to peck a kiss to Talon's sharp jaw. The simple gesture made Nathan's absence feel more pointed.

"I'm only head over heels for one," Talon said.

“And I’m not head over heels for anyone ,” Shadrach added, stopping between Ira and Storm.

“Yet,” Ira said with a teasing smirk.

“You’re a cruel, cruel man,” Shadrach said. “You say that, but you won’t tell me who.”

“You’ll find out in time,” Ira replied. “I don’t trust you not to ruin things if I tell you too much.”

“Ruin things how?”

“Like... kill him before you’ve met just to avoid messy feelings.”

Storm had to admit, at least to himself, that that was likely. Shadrach was cold-blooded, and as far as Storm could tell, he liked not being beholden to anyone. Even Talon nodded as though this made perfect sense.

“Well, if the future you see always truly happens, that won’t be possible,” Shadrach said. “Free will is just an illusion. Isn’t that right?”

Ira scowled. “I never said free will is an illusion.”

“But if your visions always come true, then it is. There’s nothing any of us can do to change our own futures. These guys were all destined to meet the one they ended up with. Even if I tried to kill my own human, it wouldn’t work. If it did, the entire future you’ve seen would be undone.”

Storm rolled his eyes. These were exactly the kind of circular arguments Shadrach always pulled Ira into. They could go on for hours, because both of them were too

stubborn to know when to let it rest. Storm mostly blamed Shadrach, because he was the one who usually started it. Ira was just too confident in his own visions to let Shadrach have the last word.

Ira took a breath to reply—but froze instead, his gaze going distant. A hush fell over the rest of them as Ira was drawn into a new vision.

“Ooh, this should be interesting,” Shadrach murmured softly.

Storm didn’t know if Ira’s visions could be interrupted, but they all tended to wait in silence until they were over, just in case. He suspected they were overly cautious, since Wolf once said Ira fell over and banged his head during a vision and still didn’t come back to himself until the vision was over. If that didn’t bring him out of it prematurely, he doubted a conversation happening around him would be enough to do it. Still, he waited in silence along with the others, wondering what Ira would say when he came back to himself and found them all waiting.

But Ira didn’t calmly come back to himself like he usually did. He sucked down a sharp breath, closed his eyes, and hung his head. His shoulders shook, and he covered his eyes with one hand.

“Oh, God, all those people,” he whispered. “There’s not—enough time.”

“Ira,” Wolf said, reaching across the countertop and taking his hand.

Ira raised his head, his brown eyes shining with tears. He looked around at all of them, and finally, his gaze settled on Storm .

“We need weapons,” he said. “Everybody get a weapon. Alex, Luke, get the holy water. It’s already starting.”

“What’s starting?” Storm asked as Alex and Luke rushed to the weapons table across the room.

Ira sniffled hard. “The guild is under attack.”

Storm’s heart lurched. It took him far too long to identify the emotion as fear .

“Nathan,” he croaked.

Ira nodded, speaking frantically. “He’s there. Everyone is there. The possessors—they found a way to make it work. Weston—it was a trap. It was all part of the kalmach’s plan. We have to go. They’ll need our help.”

“We can’t cross the property line.” Storm focused on his breaths, keeping them even and deep, to combat the panic that threatened to swallow him whole. Nathan was there, being ambushed with the guild. Storm had to help him .

“That won’t be a problem. They’ve disabled the wards. The demons—there are so many...” Ira shook his head, as though to focus. “We have to help. There are bad people in the guild, yes, but just as many who are good . Nathan, Isaac, Judah, Daniel, the children .”

Alex turned a wide-eyed gaze toward Talon, his arms full of sheathed swords. “Talon,” he entreated.

Talon nodded, cupping the side of Alex’s neck with one hand. “Yes, we’ll help, little bird.” He lifted one of the swords from Alex’s arms, looking dubious. “I’ve never been on this end of one of these before.”

Storm took one of the swords and met Alex’s eyes. “Let’s go. I don’t know the way, so I’ll follow behind you and Talon.”

The rest of them grabbed swords—even Shadrach. And then they were all rushing out to the parking lot and piling into the cars. To Storm’s surprise, Ira clambered into the truck with him, and Wolf followed on his heels. Malachi and Luke took the backseat, and Shadrach climbed into the Viper with Talon and Alex.

“Why are you all in my truck?” Storm asked as he put it in drive and squealed tires pulling out after Talon’s sleek black sports car.

“Because there’s no point in taking all of our cars,” Malachi said.

“And you’ll drive like a maniac to get us there as fast as possible,” Wolf said.

“But not so crazy that you’d risk wrecking,” Ira added.

“All right, all right,” he grouched, pulling out onto the highway. The engine roared under his foot. No matter how fast he tried to be, he couldn’t get there soon enough. He just hoped Nathan would be okay until he made it.

The ride was tense and quiet. Storm had to consciously relax his hands so he didn’t bend the steering wheel. The sun was hanging low on the horizon, molten colors streaking across the sky, when Ira sucked down a sharp breath and pointed.

“Up ahead there. You see that?”

A plume of dark gray rose into the air above the trees.

Luke leaned forward. “That’s smoke.”

“That’s the guild.” Ira’s voice was strangled, and Wolf laid a hand on his knee.

“You stay here,” Wolf told him. “You’re not a fighter.”

“No, screw that! I’m coming. I have to help. I can at least help Principal Barker get the kids to safety.”

Wolf blew out a hard breath. “Ira...”

“I’m not staying in the car,” he said harshly.

Wolf opened his mouth to speak, but the cheerful jingle of a ringtone interrupted him. With a growl, he dug his phone from his pocket and put it on speaker.

“What’s up?”

“How do you guys want to do this?” It was Talon. “Alex says we’re getting close.”

Storm looked at Ira. “You saw it. What are we running into? How do we approach?”

“Um.” Ira smoothed the loose strands of hair behind his ears, his brown face paler than normal. “The gate’s open. We can just drive right in. We—We should go to the admin building. It’s the main building at the front of the compound. It’s where most of the demons descended when they broke the wall.”

“How did they break the wall?” Luke asked. “How the hell did this happen?”

“They had explosives,” Ira said hollowly. “Breaking the wall broke the wards.”

“Shit,” Alex murmured through the speaker.

“How likely are we to be killed on sight for showing up here?” Shadrach drawled.

“You all look human,” Ira said. “Soon enough, the possessor demons won’t. That’ll be enough for most people to overlook you.”

“What?” Storm asked. “What does that mean?”

“It means they perfected the drug,” Ira said. “They’re going to break out.”

“ Oh my god ,” Alex breathed. “ How many? ”

Ira’s eyes were glassy with unshed tears, his gaze unfocused with remembered horror. “I don’t know.”

The wall became visible first, running alongside the road. They couldn’t see the hole from here, but the smoke was a heavy gray cloud above. Talon barely slowed as his sports car skidded through the open gate. Storm did the same as best as his larger truck would allow.

“Where was Nate?” he asked suddenly.

The admin building, directly up ahead where the circular drive was leading them, was also smoking. One wall had fallen in, and men and women were visible both inside and out. Some had swords, and some had guns .

“ Nate said he was going to talk to Weston ,” Alex said. “ He would’ve been around back, where the jail is. We have no idea if he’d still be there, though. ”

“I’m going there,” Storm said, stopping crookedly at the edge of the drive behind Talon’s car. “I have to find him.”

“We’ll help you get there,” Luke said as they all spilled from the truck. Talon, Alex, and Shadrach joined them. They all left the sheaths behind and turned toward the broken building.

Screams and shouts filled the air, interspersed with demonic snarls and guttural

hisses. The pop and crack of gunfire set Storm's teeth on edge. The demons had brought guns ? Guns gave them too much of an advantage. It would be all too easy for Nathan to take a stray bullet. He'd never had Storm's blood to help him heal. A bullet would kill him. Hell, a bullet to the head or heart would still kill any of the other Rink humans, but at least they stood a chance if it landed anywhere else. What if Nathan was bleeding out somewhere, and Storm was too late?

Ira grabbed his arm, his eyes wide but his jaw set firmly, shaking Storm from his spiral. "Don't panic. You can do this."

Storm nodded. "Okay. Let's go."

Chapter 22

Nathan

Nathan's heart pounded like a drum, ringing in his ears. Sweat coated his brow, trickling down his spine. The screams and cries of the battle raging nearby twisted his stomach in knots, but he focused on the huddling figures in front of him.

The children.

When he'd rushed from the jail, he hadn't gone into battle. He'd gone to the dormitory, ushering all the minors from their rooms and leading them, with a handful of the teaching staff who lived in the compound, to the orphanage. Principal Barker had made a break for the school bus, which was now idling on the back side of the building, hidden from the battle.

"There's not enough room on the bus for all of us," one of the teen girls murmured, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Yes there is," he whispered fiercely. "You find a seat and let one of the little ones sit in your lap. It'll be tight, and maybe some of you have to sit in the aisles if you must, but you'll all fit." He looked over at Barker. "Get them to a safe house. Don't stop for anything. If the back gate is shut, you drive right through it. Understand?"

Barker nodded. "I understand."

One by one, they ushered the children onto the bus. As promised, the little ones sat in

the older kids' laps. The oldest teenagers sat in the aisle. Everyone was silent. Only soft snuffles and careful whispers filled the air.

On the steps of the bus, Barker turned to look at him, his eyes wide behind his wired frames. "What are you going to do?"

"Go help the others, now that I know the children are okay," he said, stepping back. "Go, go, go. Get them out of here."

Barker turned away, closing the bus doors and taking the wheel. Nathan waited, his heart in his throat, until the bus disappeared over the hill toward the back gate. They'd be okay. The demons came from the front. When he could no longer hear the engine, he knew they'd made it, and a sigh of relief left him. It didn't matter what happened to him now. He could throw himself into the battle, and if he died today, he'd know he'd done the right thing.

He just wished he could see Storm one more time.

He broke into a run toward the administrative building. Before he reached it, the back door flew open, and a blond figure tumbled out onto the grass, his sword flying from his grip. A stranger with black eyes followed him out the door, aiming a handgun at him.

Nathan didn't have a weapon—he'd left his in his car when he'd brought Weston to the jail earlier that afternoon—so he rushed forward, grabbing the stranger's wrists and pushing the gun up just as the woman pulled the trigger. She fired into the air rather than at the prone paladin on the ground.

"Sword!" Nathan shouted.

The paladin—Julian Heroux—scrabbled for his sword and lunged toward them,

sinking the blade through the woman's chest. She gasped as the black faded from her eyes. Guilt cut through Nathan, but they didn't have a choice. It was her or them.

He picked up the handgun. It wouldn't kill a demon, but it was better than nothing.

"Thanks, Captain Accardi," Julian said, panting. His body trembled with adrenaline, and a sheen of sweat coated his forehead.

Nathan nodded. "Where are Nicolas and Daniel?"

"I don't know. We got separated."

"Okay. Come on. Let's go help who we can."

Julian straightened. "Yes, sir."

Inside, this section of the building was dark. Screams came to them from further down the long hallway, so Nathan led the way toward the worst of it, holding the gun down and ready in front of him.

"Those are possessed people, right?" Julian asked in a hushed whisper as he followed on Nathan's heels.

"Yeah."

"So—there are people trapped in those bodies. Each one we kill..."

Nathan turned without stopping, grabbing Julian's shoulder and squeezing as they drew even with each other. "Don't think about that right now, okay? We don't have a choice. If we don't defend ourselves, they'll kill us. And if they bring down the guild, countless more will die without our protection."

Julian nodded, his face twisting. “Right, yeah. It’s just...”

“I know. Survive now. Repent later.” It wasn’t ideal, but they had no choice, did they?

At the end of the hall, debris from upstairs had fallen into the doorway. Between the two of them, they managed to push the doors open, scraping brick and shattered wood aside and clambering over the pieces they couldn’t move.

What once was the grand foyer was now open to the night sky. The front wall was almost completely gone. The upstairs was exposed in two places and seemed dangerously precarious in places. Bodies littered the rubble, and even more were still fighting, the gleam of blades in the last dying light of the sun catching his eye.

Some of the bodies were ripped apart, and possessor demons climbed up the remaining walls, pouncing on paladins below and ripping into them with vicious snarls. Their bodies were emaciated, with leathery brown skin dripping with the blood of the victims they’d climbed out of.

Crumpled amongst the rubble, Nathan saw a familiar face, brick dust caught in his curly hair.

“Judah!” He fell to his knees beside the boy and pulled a heavy wooden beam off his chest.

Judah didn’t respond. Nathan leaned in, feeling for a pulse, and his breath hitched when he found none. He was gone. Another young casualty in this never-ending war.

Nathan dashed a tear from the corner of his eye and stood, rage boiling in his blood. He didn’t have a holy weapon, but the gun could stop the possessed humans. Gritting his teeth, he opened fire. They had guns of their own, using them to pick off the

paladins who didn't have long-range weapons. Julian was nearby, kneeling behind some rubble. When Nathan picked off the shooters near him, he popped up and stabbed another, his face a mask of determination.

In the middle of the battlefield, a lone figure stood still. One of Nathan's bullets hit him in the chest, but he didn't react. Black eyes locked onto his, and the strange man smiled. His teeth lengthened into points. The color leached from his skin, turning him unnaturally white. His fingers hooked into claws, and he roared. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't a possessor.

Nearby, one of the possessed sent a spray of bullets into the crowd. Nathan, barely able to take his eyes off the monster in the middle of the battle, felt a hot ball of fire hit him in the gut. It slammed into him like a baseball bat, sending him spinning to the ground. He lost his grip on the gun and brought his trembling hands to the wound near his hip, shocked to find it sticky with hot blood.

He rolled over, gasping for breath. Pain radiated from the wound like an alarm blaring in his skull. Blood bloomed on his shirt. Shit, this wasn't good.

His vision blurred, and when he blinked, two familiar figures appeared in the fray. Talon and Shadrach, wielding holy blades, circled the monster. His mind had trouble processing what he was seeing. Talon and Shadrach? In HQ? With holy swords? Maybe he was hallucinating.

Around them, the guns stopped. Everything stopped. The paladins drew up short as the black faded from all the attackers' eyes. Nathan knew what was about to happen, but he couldn't seem to draw enough breath to shout out a warning.

Between Talon and Shadrach, the monster laughed, a guttural sound that sent a chill down Nathan's spine.

“Time to end the fun,” the monster said.

The thing barely looked human anymore, its skin as white as snow. Long, bat-like wings grew from its back. A long, black tongue flicked from its mouth. It looked like a marble gargoyle.

“Step aside, and let me kill them,” the monster said. “They will hunt us no more.”

“No,” Talon said grimly.

The monster tilted its head. “I won’t stop until it’s ash. I promised her.”

“You’d die for Lilith’s vendetta?” Talon asked.

“It isn’t just hers,” the monster replied. “The guild hunts us all. Why would you protect them?”

“I made a promise, too,” Talon said.

“That’s enough talk,” Shadrach said, swinging his sword.

The monster dodged. All around them, the possessed began to scream, their bodies breaking and spraying blood.

“Kill them,” Nathan rasped. He sucked down a breath, wincing in pain, and screamed as loud as he could, “Kill them now! Don’t let the demons out!”

The paladins attacked, and Nathan’s eyes slipped closed.

“Nate! Nathan, oh shit , sunshine,” a familiar voice murmured. A scraping sound against rock caught his attention, and then warm hands cradled his face.

It took incredible effort to pry his eyes open, but whether this was real or imagined, he wanted to see . Needed to see Storm in what might be his final moments. Red eyes filled his vision below a shock of starlight white hair. Thumbs stroked his cheeks, and he smiled.

“Storm,” he breathed. “How are you here?”

“The bad demons got in. You think the good demons wouldn’t come to help?” Storm quipped. He ducked his head, plucking at Nathan’s sticky shirt. “Fuck, you’re bleeding too fast.”

The rapid pop-pop-pop of gunfire made Nathan jerk so hard pain flashed through him.

“Whoa, it’s okay,” Storm said quickly. “It’s Malachi and Wolf.” He glanced over his shoulder, but his broad body mostly blocked Nathan from seeing anything. “They’re helping the paladins, uh, handle the possessors.”

Nathan’s eyes burned. “All those people...”

“It’s you or them, sunshine,” Storm said kindly.

“The monster?”

“Amon, a kalmach demon,” Storm said, glancing away again. “Just as we thought. Shadrach and Talon are handling it. Kalmachs are tough, but I think two leviathans are more than a match.”

“Let me see. I have to see.”

Pursing his lips as though he’d rather not, Storm reluctantly shifted to one side.

Bodies and blood covered almost every surface, it seemed. Malachi and Wolf were both holding guns the possessors had abandoned, picking off the humans that were still writhing on the ground. Paladins were doing the same, ending their suffering with blades and quick prayers. Still others were locked in battle with the possessors who'd escaped. They moved on all fours, dodging blades and swiping at paladins with their claws and teeth.

In the middle of the room, Shadrach had dropped his blade and was grappling with Amon, forcefully wrenching the monster's arms behind his back. One of his wings had been cut off, and black blood spilled down his back from the stump. Talon lunged forward with a snarl, sinking his borrowed holy blade into Amon's chest. He roared, thrashing, and Shadrach let him go. He fell to the ground, the strength fading from his body.

It was over. The demons were gone.

No. There were still demons here, and the paladins wouldn't abide that. Panic surged through Nathan, granting him lucidity.

"Help me up," he said, gripping Storm's sleeve. "We have to get you guys out of here."

"You shouldn't move?—"

"Up!"

With a growl, Storm pulled Nathan's arm over his shoulders and hauled him to his feet. The movement sent pain flashing through him, and Nathan hissed.

Just as he feared, Sloan pushed his way through the survivors, his eyes wide as he looked from person to person.

“Demons,” he said, pointing. “Traitors!”

Alex, drifting toward Talon, raised his hands in surrender. “We came to help.”

“You came with the scourge!” Sloan shouted. The paladins shifted around him, wary and confused. “You did this! You helped them get here!”

“We just killed the demon responsible for this attack!” Talon said, gesturing to the quickly decaying body at his feet.

“Lies! Deceit meant to trick us! Paladins, kill them!” Sloan ordered.

Malachi and Wolf raised their guns in warning. Sloan and the rest of the paladins went still, and the rest of the Rink group converged behind Malachi and Wolf.

“Ira,” Wolf called.

“Here, here,” Ira said, darting toward them.

“Storm,” Talon said, gesturing for them to come.

“He’s hurt,” Storm said.

Sloan looked at Storm and Nathan. “Captain Accardi, you need to see Doctor Maxwell.”

“No, we’ll take care of him,” Storm said.

Sloan looked thunderous. “He’s one of us.”

Storm growled.

Nathan's head lolled. It was a struggle to keep his eyes open. "Don't. Just take me... Get me..." He didn't want to stay here. Whatever happened next, he wanted to be with Storm.

"I am," Storm said under his breath, all but dragging him toward the others. "We're going."

"No, you can't take him!" Sloan shouted. "He needs medical attention!"

"And he'll get it," Alex said.

Storm stopped beside Talon and Alex. Nathan tugged his arm from Storm's grip and reached down, sliding his ring from his finger. There were two of Sloan when he looked over, but that didn't matter. He could tell Sloan was watching him. He tossed his signet ring to the rubble.

"I quit," he rasped. The guild was safe. There was nothing left here for him. They could rebuild without him, and he could start his life with Storm.

Storm's arm tightened around his back. "Let's go."

"No," Sloan called after them. "I don't accept this! Captain Accardi, if you leave now, you are the enemy ! We will hunt you all down!"

"I'd say you've got enough problems of your own right now," Malachi sneered.

"Go, go," Talon said, ushering the others away.

Malachi and Wolf backed away, keeping their guns trained on the surviving paladins while the rest of them piled into the cars. Nathan grunted in pain as he climbed up into the cab of the truck and collapsed in the middle seat.

His eyes fluttered shut, and time juddered forward without him. He came to with hands shaking him.

“Wake up, baby. Stay with me.”

“Mm,” he managed to say.

“Give him your blood,” another voice said from his other side. Ira?

“What about the bullet?” someone asked.

“Ira, hop out,” Storm said. “Let’s lay him out. Someone will have to dig the bullet out.”

That didn’t sound good. Nathan tried to open his mouth and speak, but nothing came out. He wasn’t sure he even moved. A car door opened, and a cool breeze touched his skin. Hands tugged him to lay flat, and the movement sent pain up his abdomen and all the way down to his knee. He groaned.

“I know, baby, I know. Just hang on.”

“God, that’s a lot of blood.” He recognized that voice, too. It was Luke.

“Luke, go around and hold his arms down. This is going to hurt, and he might react.”

“Are you sure you want to be the one to do this?” Ira asked.

“Yeah. I’ll make it as quick and painless as I can.”

“St...” Storm , he tried to say. “P...” Please .

“I’m here, sunshine. Here we go. Try to hold still.”

Pain lit up his side. There was a weight on his legs, hands on his arms. He tensed, but he couldn’t shake any of it. A choked sound left him. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t unlock his body enough to expand his lungs. He was dying, this was what dying felt like, and it hurt hurt hurt .

It seemed to go on forever, until his head swirled and everything faded. And then...

“I’ve got it!”

Some of the pain faded—enough that he was able to breathe—and he blinked his eyes open, panting.

“Storm,” he breathed. “Storm.”

“Here, sunshine.” Storm leaned over him, a knee wedged between Nathan’s legs.

“Give him your blood now, hurry,” Ira said. “And be prepared for him to pass out. He lost a lot of blood, but if you give him yours it’ll help him recover.”

Storm’s hands guided his fuzzy gaze to his. His jaw flexed, and then he sealed their lips together, pressing his tongue inside Nathan’s mouth. A strangely sweet liquid filled his mouth, and he swallowed reflexively. Incrementally, his mind began to clear, the darkness around the edges of his vision faded, and he felt more grounded in reality. He raised a hand to cup the back of Storm’s head, kissing him back properly.

When Storm parted, he studied Nathan’s face intently for a moment, and then smiled. He glanced down at the bullet wound and hummed.

“Wonderful. It’s closing up.”

“It is?” Nathan asked, letting his head fall back onto the seat.

“Yeah. Think you can sit up? We need to get you home. We’re still too close to the guild.”

“They won’t come after us right now.” His tongue felt too large, causing him to slur. “Too many dead. Too much damage. They have to pick up the pieces.”

“Still. I’d rather you pass out in a bed.”

“Bed would be nice,” Luke added from the backseat.

Nathan sighed. Sitting up would take monumental effort. He held out his hands. “Help.”

Storm pulled him upright, and he sagged, his head swirling.

“Scoot into the middle. You can lean over on me.”

Nathan glanced around the truck as he scooted over. Malachi, Luke, and Wolf sat in the backseat. Ira climbed into the passenger seat, offering him a reassuring smile, and Storm took the wheel once more. His beefy shoulder looked far too inviting to resist. He leaned over—and knew no more.

Chapter 23

Storm

Storm didn't sleep. After he dropped the others off at the Rink, he took Nathan straight to his apartment. His precious human didn't wake as he carried him inside. He undressed him on top of the blankets of his bed and used a warm washcloth to wash away the worst of the bloodstains. Nathan stirred just long enough to crawl into bed. Storm undressed slower, studying Nathan's too-pale face. He'd come far too close to losing him tonight. What if they hadn't gotten there in time? Would the guild's doctor have been able to save him?

He shook off the maudlin thoughts and crawled into bed, curling around Nathan and settling in to wait for him to wake. He would keep watch, delighting in the sensation of warm skin and the reassuring thump of Nathan's pulse.

The moon traveled slowly across the sky outside, and when Nathan finally stirred, warm morning light shone through the closed curtains downstairs, giving the apartment a hazy glow. He touched the back of Storm's hand, draped around him, and rolled onto his back, blinking blearily at him.

He'd come so close to losing him. What would he have done without this man? If he'd had to face immortality without Nathan by his side? A month ago, he wouldn't have guessed he would be so attached to one human. Now he couldn't live without him. He wouldn't. If Nathan had died last night, Storm would've taken one of those holy blades and followed him right into the abyss.

He leaned in and kissed him. Nathan hummed, rolling toward him and throwing an arm and leg around him.

“Thank you for coming last night,” Nathan murmured when they parted. “When the attack started, I just wanted to see you again in case...”

Storm growled, crushing Nathan against him. “In case nothing. I’m not letting you leave me, sunshine. You’re stuck with me forever.”

To his horror, Nathan’s eyes filled with tears. They spilled from his eyes to soak into the pillow. “I love you,” he sobbed. “I don’t know what I’d do without you now.”

Storm reeled him in, letting Nathan muffle his sobs against his chest. He didn’t realize it until now, but some small part of him had been worried Nathan would regret leaving his ring behind and walking away from the guild. That he’d wake up, decide he’d made a mistake, and go back to them. But Nathan loved him. He didn’t think their relationship was a mistake. This was the beginning of their forever.

“I love you, too, sunshine,” he whispered, carding his fingers into the back of Nathan’s hair. “Do you know why I call you sunshine?”

“Mm? No. I just thought it was a nickname.”

“No. It has meaning to me.”

Nathan tilted his head back to look at him. “It’s not because the sun hurts you, is it? Because that’s not a nice nickname.”

Storm snorted. “Of course not.”

Nathan smiled, settling. “Okay, then why?”

Storm kissed him, needing to taste that smile. “It’s because you’ve brought light to my life. Light and warmth and color. My world was just empty and gray before I met you. You changed me completely. I’ll never be the same.”

“Oh, Storm,” Nathan breathed, and it was the best thing Storm had ever heard. He drew Storm into a deep, slow kiss, as though indulging in the taste of him.

Storm wanted to push for more, but he wasn’t sure Nathan could handle more yet. He was probably still recovering from the gunshot, at least internally. Luke and Malachi had said it took Luke a while to recover from the blood loss after being stabbed. He would wait as long as Nathan needed.

When they parted, Nathan sighed heavily. There was a weight behind it, and Storm cocked his head.

“What’s wrong?”

Nathan flapped a hand in the air above their heads. “I’ll have to leave my house now. And I don’t have a job. I’m really starting completely over.”

Storm stroked his back. Nathan had given up so much to be with him. Storm wasn’t sure he was worthy. “We’ll go back to the house one day, I promise. And I’m sure you can go to work at the Rink with the others. I don’t think they make much, but they get by. They get new clients all the time, because word’s getting around that they do good work.”

Nathan’s eyes were filling with tears again. “Yeah, I think I’d like working with them.” He sighed. “It’s hard to imagine a time in the future where the paladins are no longer a threat to us. I tried so hard to make them see that you guys weren’t the enemy. I’m sorry I failed.”

Storm brushed a kiss to his forehead. "Sunshine, they were never going to accept the truce."

"I know. I just hoped . I wanted to make them see reason."

"That's because you're a good man, Nate," Storm said softly. "Better than anyone I know. Certainly better than me. I don't know what I've done to deserve you, but I want to make you happy, if I can."

"I am happy," Nathan whispered.

Was he? The tears suggested otherwise. Storm shot him a doubtful look and wiped away the wetness collecting in the corner of his eye. "You sure about that?"

Nathan huffed out a wet laugh. "Yeah. You make me happy. This is... I don't know. Everything that's happened has me a little off-kilter, I guess."

"I hear humans need time to adjust to big changes."

Nathan chuckled. "Yeah, we do." He sighed, nuzzling closer and closing his eyes. "If you'd told me I'd feel this way a few weeks ago, I'd have thought you were crazy. But I can't imagine my life without you. I need you. More than I need the guild. I can still fight monsters and protect people with the... traitors? Outcasts? They need a name." His nose scrunched.

Storm snorted. "You can bring that up with them the next time you see them. You know a thing or two about running a team. They could use some cohesion, probably."

"Sounds like they've been doing all right."

"Mm, yes, but they'll need more organization."

Nathan's eyes blinked open. "You think so?"

"Ira says you won't be the last one to join us. I don't know how big our little group will wind up being—hell, I'm not sure he knows, either—but odds are we'll need some kind of official leaders eventually."

"I don't want to lead anyone," Nathan murmured, pressing closer. His length pressed deliciously against Storm's own, separated by the thin fabric of their underwear. "I just want to kill monsters and spend time with you."

"Sounds like heaven to me." He drew Nathan into a deep, drugging kiss, the kind that dragged a moan of surrender from his human. Their legs tangled, and Nathan rolled onto his back, insistently reeling Storm on top of him.

"Can we?" Nathan breathed. "I want you. Want to stop thinking and worrying and just be with you. Make me stop thinking. You always know what to do."

"You sure you're up for it?" Storm asked, kissing him again. "You were shot last night. You might need more time."

"I'm sure, I'm sure. Please?"

Storm lifted his head, gazing down at him. Nathan's cool gray eyes were bright with want. His teeth sank into his bottom lip, and Storm couldn't resist. He nodded, shifting Nathan's legs further apart with his own. With deliberate slowness, he dragged his palm up Nathan's chest to curl around his throat, giving him just enough firmness for him to know Storm meant it.

"Then let go of your thoughts," Storm said. "Empty your mind. Focus only on me."

Nathan let out a shaky sigh, curling his fingers around Storm's wrist. "Yes."

“Tell me you’re mine.” Because he loved to hear it.

“I’m yours.” There was no hesitation, and they shared a smile.

Storm’s free hand stroked Nathan’s body, his thumb grazing the scar on his hip. It would forever be a reminder of how close he’d come to losing him. Nathan wriggled, drawing attention to the hard length waiting in his boxer briefs. Storm ignored it for now, lavishing attention on both of Nathan’s nipples instead, pinching and rolling each one with his fingers and then using lips and tongue, until Nathan was arching up against him, his legs tightening around Storm’s sides as though to drag him closer.

Storm sat up, lifting Nathan’s hands and guiding them toward the headboard. “Grip the posts. Don’t let go. If you let go, I stop.”

Nathan obeyed with a groan while Storm leaned over to fetch the lube. When he returned, he smoothed both hands up Nathan’s hairy thighs, stopping with the bulge cradled between his hands. Casting him a wicked smile, Storm grabbed the waistband of his boxer briefs and ripped . Nathan gasped, raising his head to look down as Storm ripped them right down the middle, exposing him to the air.

“I liked those,” he protested halfheartedly.

“I didn’t say you could talk,” Storm replied. He trailed a thumb down the crease where his inner thigh met his groin, grazing his balls and finding his hole. He plucked at the dark fabric hugging Nathan’s thighs. “So pretty.”

Nathan flushed, lifting his gaze to the ceiling. Even his neck turned red. Storm chuckled, low and pleased. He opened the lube with a quiet snick and drizzled a liberal amount on Nathan’s length and sac. With his free hand, he massaged Nathan’s puckered hole and eased one finger inside. Nathan sighed, canting his hips for more.

“You’re fucking beautiful,” Storm growled, sinking his finger all the way to the knuckle just to hear Nathan’s pretty moan. He thrust it in and out, tossing the lube away and taking his length in hand, slick and messy. A second finger joined the first, twisting and scissoring. His own cock throbbed with need, watching Nathan’s hips work in time with his hands.

“Please, Storm, enough. I want you now .”

Good, because Storm had to have him. He sloppily slicked his length, hissing at the grip of his own hand, and pressed the head of his cock against Nathan’s entrance. Nathan stopped breathing as he breached him, the tendons on his forearms standing out as he tightened his grip on the headboard posts.

Storm took his jaw in hand, forcing him to meet his eyes. “Focus on me. Only me. Breathe.”

Nathan’s body unlocked. He inhaled, and Storm sank deeper into the tight clench of his channel.

“God, you’re big,” Nathan whined.

Storm chuckled. “And you’re very tight. You should’ve let me take my time with you.”

“No, I’ll adjust. Wanted to feel you.”

Storm worked his hips back and forth, fucking a little deeper with each thrust. “Yeah? You feel me now? You feel me filling you up?”

“ Yes ,” he sobbed. “Touch me, please touch me.”

Storm chuckled darkly. “No. I want you to come on my cock. Only my cock.”

Nathan didn't reply, grunting as Storm widened his thrusts, grinding deep with each pass. He was fucking perfect, gripping the headboard and arching up into him. He obeyed so well. This was what he meant when he said he didn't want to lead. He liked handing over the reins to someone else, liked letting Storm call the shots and take all the weight of responsibility from his shoulders for a while. And Storm took it gladly.

He cradled Nathan's throat with one hand as he pounded into him in earnest. Their ragged breaths and wanton moans filled the air. Nathan opened like a flower for him, his petal-soft skin and hot hole the perfect combination, driving Storm higher and higher toward that molten peak.

Nathan came first, his legs clamping hard around Storm as his cock shot between them. His channel fluttered around Storm's length, milking his orgasm from him, and he stilled with a deep groan, filling Nathan with his cum.

With another quiet whimper, Nathan turned his head and captured Storm's mouth, kissing him lazily as they both recovered. Storm slid his hands up, tugging Nathan's hands off the headboard. He wrapped them immediately around Storm, curling his fingers into his hair to deepen the kiss.

“I love you,” Nathan breathed when they parted, and a shiver of delight went down Storm's spine.

“I love you, too,” Storm murmured. “You're my sun. My whole world revolves around you and only you. From now on.”

NATHAN

The Rink smelled like fresh pizza, and soda fizzed on Nathan's tongue. They were all sitting on the padded training floor, pizza boxes open in their impromptu circle. Even the demons were partaking, which was a rare occurrence. They didn't have to eat as often as the humans, and this was the first time Nathan had seen some of them eat.

"You guys need a name," he said, broaching the subject for the first time. Beside him, Storm cast him a warm smile. It felt like a reward for finally bringing up what he'd mentioned in bed three days ago.

For three days, he'd been free. It wasn't a term he ever would've associated with not being a paladin, but it was the only one that fit. He'd been hampered by his career as a paladin, forced to obey rules he didn't agree with. Now that he no longer wore the signet ring—just a tan line where it used to be—he was free to make his own choices. A daunting task, at times, but well worth it. Having Storm by his side was a big comfort. Storm was always there to remind him that it was okay to have things and do things for himself. They'd moved some of his stuff into Storm's apartment, shut off the power and water to his house and covered all the furniture with sheets. He'd always considered his house to be his sanctuary, but he was discovering that his home now wasn't a building. It was a person. He and Storm lived practically in each other's pockets. They fell asleep on the sofa together and took showers together. It was so sweetly domestic that he sometimes forgot Storm was a demon. That fact always came back to him in the bedroom, when Storm took great pleasure in causing Nathan the most exquisite agonies. He never relented until Nathan gave it all. Nathan loved every second.

“A name for what?” Alex asked with his mouth full. Beside him, Luke snorted so hard he nearly spat out his own half-chewed pizza. Alex chortled, elbowing him.

Nathan smiled patiently. They were both so much different than they used to be before they’d met their demonic partners. Lighter. Nathan wondered if the same was true for him. It felt true.

“For your business. Your group. This place.” He gestured around them, at the disco ball and the colored lights overhead. Their reflections gleamed back at them on the ceiling.

“I hear ‘paladins’ is taken,” Alex quipped.

“I wouldn’t want that name anyway,” Luke said, missing the besotted smile Malachi shot him.

“The connotations of that one aren’t great,” Angela added, tossing a chocolate curl over her shoulder. “At least based on the things I’ve heard.”

“But you do still hunt demons,” Nathan said. “Some demons. The bad demons. You protect the innocent.”

“We,” Luke corrected. “You’re one of us now, traitor.”

Nathan snorted, leaning over to line his arm up with Storm’s. “Absolutely. So, we need a name. Something that tells people what we stand for.”

To Nathan’s right, Ira was watching them all without speaking, his warm brown eyes moving from person to person. There was a small, knowing smile on his face. Nathan didn’t know what to make of it.

“What do we stand for?” Zachary asked.

“We’re... protectors of the innocent,” Alex said hesitantly. “We protect people from monsters and bad humans alike. We try to get the bad humans arrested, though, we don’t stab them.”

Angela cackled. “Thanks for clarifying.”

Alex threw a pepperoni at her.

“The Protectors?” Zachary said, wrinkling his nose. “Sounds dumb.”

“The... Guardians?” Luke ventured, tilting his head.

“Sounds like a cheesy superhero movie,” Zachary said.

They stood guard between the darkness and the light, not on one side or the other. They saw the shades of gray where others didn’t, recognized that there was good as well as bad on both sides. What stood guard at a gate between two points?

“Sentinels,” Nathan said. “We’re sentinels. We stand guard against evil, both supernatural and human.”

“Sentinels,” Luke repeated, nodding. “I like it.”

Beside them, Ira’s smile bloomed. “Yes. Sentinels.”

Nathan pointed at him. “You already knew, didn’t you?”

“I’ve known for months,” he admitted readily.

“Why didn’t you just say so?”

He ducked his head to hide his smile. “It had to come from you, Nate. You’re the one who names us.”

That was humbling.

“You always knew I’d wind up here?” he asked softly.

He shrugged one shoulder. “I didn’t know when or how.”

“He knows lots of things,” Talon said with a smirk. “Pisses Shadrach off to no end. It’s highly amusing.”

“He’s just easily riled.” Ira flapped a dismissive hand.

Nathan straightened. That reminded him, he needed to ask a favor of Talon. He met the demon’s eyes over the pizza boxes, and his dark brows rose in question. Nathan glanced around, uncertain whether to ask in front of everyone or ask to speak to him alone. No matter what he did, Alex would learn the truth. He doubted Talon would keep any secrets from his human partner. And Alex would likely tell Luke. Hell, Ira probably already knew .

“I need to ask a favor,” he said, setting his pizza down and pushing the plate away.

“Ask,” Talon said shortly.

“Weston,” Nathan said. “The guy we brought into the guild that led the demons there.”

“Yes.”

“I want you to go to the guild while the wards are still down.”

Talon’s black eyes gleamed. “And?”

“Kill him.”

A hush went over the group. Alex looked like he aged ten years in the span of a few seconds, and Luke leaned toward Malachi like he needed him to stay upright. Talon didn’t move.

“I don’t know what the guild will do to him, but he’s too dangerous to live. He might know how to make those hex pills. Even if he doesn’t, he helped kill dozens of people. Innocents and paladins alike. I know you don’t care about the paladins, but?—”

“He’ll do it,” Alex said.

Talon turned toward Alex, the hungry glitter in his gaze replaced with bald concern. “Are you sure?”

Alex nodded. “He’s right. Weston’s too dangerous. Nate said he worshipped that Amon demon. He might have other connections to other demons. If he’s holding a grudge—it’s just too dangerous.” He shrugged simply. “Just make it quick?”

“He doesn’t deserve quick,” Storm said. “He nearly got Nate killed.”

“If he’s going into the guild, I want him to be quick,” Alex argued, albeit kindly. “I’m much more concerned about him making it back out than making sure Weston suffers. He’ll be dead. That’ll have to be good enough.”

Storm opened his mouth, but Nathan laid a hand on his knee and brought his reply to

an abrupt halt.

“It’s okay,” Nathan said. “He won’t be able to hurt anyone else ever again. That’ll definitely be enough. And that’s what I care about. That’s why I’m making the request.”

“Favor,” Talon said, pointing at him. “You asked for a favor. Generally, if you ask for a favor, it means you owe that person in the future.”

For the first time, it struck Nathan that he was making a deal with a demon. “You want me to owe you a favor?”

Talon’s shark-like grin brought to mind blood in the water. “I do. You never know when it might come in handy.”

“Don’t worry, Nate,” Luke said, stretching his legs out and laying his plate on his lap. “Whenever Mal or I owe Talon a favor, he usually winds up asking us to cover one of Alex’s shifts so they can have some, uh, quality time together.” He cast a covert glance at Zachary and Angela.

“I’m fifteen,” Angela deadpanned. “I know what ‘quality time’ means. None of you are subtle about what you get up to.”

Malachi snorted out a laugh.

Storm leaned over, smoothing a hand up Nathan’s back to curl around his neck. “Are you finished eating? We should head home.”

Nathan agreed, draining his soda and picking up his trash.

“I’ll handle it in a few days, after the guild’s had time to let their guard down some,”

Talon promised. “I’ll text you when it’s done.”

Gratitude filled him. Talon was the only one who could teleport into the guild and back out—besides Shadrach, who likely wouldn’t be inclined to help. While the wards were down, Talon would be able to get in easily and take care of Weston quietly.

“Thank you, Talon.” He’d feel much better knowing Weston wasn’t out there with the potential to hurt anyone else.

He let Storm lead him from the group. It was only when they were ensconced in the truck, with the moonlight shining down on them, that he asked, “Why’d we leave so early?”

“I’ve got a little surprise.” Storm started the engine, shooting him a smile.

Nathan grinned, sliding into the middle seat and curling a hand over Storm’s thigh. “A surprise? Really?”

“Yep. It’s kind of a tradition.”

“A tradition?”

Storm chuckled, patting his leg. “Just wait. You’ll see.”

Nathan settled beside him, leaving his hand to rest on Storm’s leg. The route home was a familiar one by now. He watched the houses and storefronts pass by with idle interest, content beyond words. This was what he’d been missing. He’d had companionship, friends, certainly, but nothing like this. This was a bone-deep satisfaction like he’d never known before. His eyes drifted closed, and he turned his head, pressing a kiss to the curve of Storm’s shoulder and then resting his head there.

When they pulled up at the apartment, Storm shook him awake, and Nathan blinked, raising his head and yawning.

“More tired than I thought, I guess,” he said, following Storm out of the truck and toward the building. When they reached the top floor, Nathan used his key to open the apartment door.

“Do you want to go to bed?” Storm asked, flipping the living room light on.

“No, I want my surprise.” He sat down on the sofa and smiled up at him. “You’ve gotten my hopes up. I’ve got to know now.”

The fondness in Storm’s eyes took his breath away. “Okay. Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Nathan waited, watching Storm retreat upstairs to the bedroom. While he waited, he kicked off his sneakers and tucked them under the coffee table.

When Storm returned, he sat down beside Nathan, perching on a knee and facing him sideways on the couch.

“We haven’t really talked much about the future,” Storm said, “other than that we want to stay in each other’s lives.”

Nathan nodded. “That’s the priority, yeah.”

“Well, to that end, I have something for you. We discussed you taking my blood, and if that’s something you still want, I’d like that, too. I want to spend eternity with you.”

Nathan stared, unable to formulate a response. Storm reached into his pocket and

tugged out a small, velvet box.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but a couple of the humans have these. I asked Wolf where he got the one he gave Ira.”

His heart in his throat, Nathan took the box and lifted the lid. Inside, a gold ring sat on a bed of silk. There were two rows of diamond studs on the band, and a sliver of gold that sat between them, separate from the rest of the ring. He removed it from the box, staring in awe.

“See that little button on the side?” Storm pointed out.

Nathan pressed it, and the sliver in the center popped out like a switchblade, revealing a small, razor sharp blade. He gasped, meeting Storm’s eyes.

“This is incredible.”

“I want you to use it to drink my blood,” Storm said. “I want to spend forever with you.”

Nathan softened. “I’d like that.”

Storm’s red eyes gleamed. “Really?”

He grinned. “Yes. Yes, I want to spend eternity with you.”

Storm’s face lit up, and he dragged Nathan into a kiss, almost pushing him down onto the cushion until he remembered the ring. “Oh, put it on, put it on. I want to see if it fits.”

Nathan closed the blade and slipped the ring onto his left ring finger. It fit just as

snugly as his signet ring had. He brandished his hand, and when he pressed his middle finger against the ring, the blade shot back out.

“That’s so cool,” he whispered.

Storm shed his shirt. “Why don’t you try it out?”

Nathan gaped. “What, now?”

Storm smirked. “Hell yeah. Come here.” He dragged Nathan over to straddle his lap, and Nathan spied something on the cushion on Storm’s other side—the bottle of lube from the bedroom.

“Were you hoping for something?” Nathan asked as Storm guided him to face him and sealed their mouths together.

“Maybe,” he said between kisses. “I knew I wanted you to use the blade. If you said yes and agreed to use it, I was going to get hard from it anyway.”

“Really?”

“I told you pain does it for me, sunshine.”

A shiver of anticipation went down Nathan’s spine. “Oh. Why don’t you undress me, then?”

Storm didn’t have to be told twice. His hands fell to Nathan’s waistband as their tongues tangled, loosening his jeans and pushing Nathan away just long enough to shove them and his underwear down and off. Storm’s jeans followed next, pushed down his thighs just far enough to free himself.

Within moments, Nathan was back in his lap, and Storm was smearing lube between them, coating their cocks and his fingers alike. Nathan moaned as two of Storm's big fingers eased inside him, stretching him hastily.

Curious to see Storm's reaction, Nathan curled his fingers into a fist and pressed the blade into the skin of his chest. A moan tripped from Storm's throat, and his fingers thrust harder, recklessly wanton. Black blood trickled from the wound, and Nathan ducked down to chase the droplets, lapping them up and sucking the wound.

"Fuck, sunshine," Storm breathed. "Need you right fucking now." His fingers disappeared, and then his strong hands were gripping Nathan's hips. "Come on. Sit on my cock. Let me fill you up."

Nathan moaned, rising up and letting Storm position himself at his entrance. He sank down, letting gravity aid him in taking Storm's thick cock all the way to the root. The wound under his mouth healed, so Nathan lifted his head and kissed Storm, licking into his mouth as he rocked his hips, finding a comfortable rhythm that sent starbursts of pleasure up his spine. His cock rubbed against Storm's abdomen, just enough to drive him wild.

"I love you," Storm said, the words muffled between their mouths. "So much. I don't ever want to be without you."

"You won't be," Nathan swore. "I'll be with you forever, I promise. Touch me, please, I'm so close."

Storm's lube-slick hand encircled his length, gripping tight and perfect. Nathan cried out, ducking his head and biting down so hard he tasted sweet blood. A demonic growl rolled out of Storm's chest as he fucked up into Nathan, and they came as one, Nathan spilling against Storm's stomach and Storm filling him up.

Panting, Storm said, “Well, maybe you didn’t need the knife after all.”

Nathan raised his head, licking the blood from his lips. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, sunshine. That was fantastic.”

“I’m keeping the ring.”

Storm laughed. “Good. I want everybody to know who you belong to.”

“You,” Nathan agreed readily, snuggling closer. They didn’t have to move yet, right?

“Only you.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:06 am

Boxes littered Storm's apartment. Nathan opened one on the kitchen island at random and peered inside at the familiar objects. They'd packed up everything Nathan might need from his home, then shut off the utilities and covered the furniture in sheets, emptied out the fridge and pantry, and said goodbye to his quiet, quaint little home.

He couldn't deny that he missed it, but he didn't regret choosing to leave it behind. Like many recent things in his life, he'd found something that was more important. A house was just a building. The life he was making with Storm was worth that and more.