



Summoning (Spells and Sins)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: When the air cools and the leaves fall, Who will heed the magic's call?

For in the dark is where it starts, Whether you seek money, glory, or to mend a broken heart.

Spells and sins make dreams come true, But they will take a piece of you.

But be cautious, witch, for you may find, You can't escape the magic's bind.

This Samhain, find out what rules were made to be broken with these stories from these spooky.

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AMbrOSE

A month ago, my entire world changed for the worse. It will never be the same again and there's nothing I can do to change it back. My tears fall as I kneel by my parents' grave, and I can barely breathe.

Aspen & Ellie Stone

As I stare at the letters carved into the marble stones, a suffocating truth finally hits me. Those are my parents' names. They're dead and gone—their bodies given back to the earth as our bloodline's elemental magic demands. My family—the only people who ever understood and didn't judge me—are in the ether.

It's just me now.

My family held an ancient, powerful magic. Everyone but me... The other members of the coven avoid me like the plague, because something is wrong with me. My magic doesn't work like my parents' and all the Stone witches before us. I'm defective.

My brain doesn't work right, either.

But then again, it never really has. I've always been different, and the coven knows that. The little magic I do have, I can't control. Sometimes it's nonexistent, and other times it's a tsunami that rages, destroying everything in its path. High Priest Smythe

thinks I'm a danger to the coven, a troubled boy.

At twenty years old, I'm not a boy anymore. Without my parents here to guide me, I feel like one, though. A lost boy floating through the world, waiting for someone to tether me back to reality.

Is there even a point of coming back? This world has nothing for me. I don't want to be here anymore.

Who would miss me if I disappeared?

My eyes blur with tears, and the tentative control I have on my unruly magic cracks. It seeps out of me like sand through a sieve, causing big gray clouds to gather in the sky above us. Fluffy flakes of snow fall, sticking to the dead grass. The same kind of flurries Dad used to make when there wasn't enough snow to go sledding. We'd spend hours sledding down the steep hill behind our cottage every winter when I was growing up, laughing and feeling the wind in our hair as we sailed downhill.

I may have the same natural magical gifts as Dad, but I'll never be even half the witch he was. Aspen Stone was larger than life, the kind of man everyone respected. A true pillar of our coven who was willing to help those in need. He was so powerful that he served as an elder, despite still being under one hundred years old. I am no match to him, and I don't think I ever will be.

I hear a car door shut in the distance but don't turn around to look. A lot of people are buried here.

The farther I plummet into my sadness spiral, the harder it flurries. A swift drop in temperature makes my bones rattle in my suit. The wind lashes at my face, practically turning my tears into ice on my cheek. A warm hand lands on my shoulder, offering reassurance with a firm squeeze. I peer over my shoulder to find Caulder

Scarborough looking down at me with a smile.

His handsome face is calm, his hard, masculine edges smoothed out with sympathy. His thick chocolate hair is mussed from the wind, and flurries rest on his perfectly trimmed beard. The compassion in his usual stoic toffee eyes almost unravels me.

“Let’s get you out of the cold,” he says as he steers me from their graves toward the parking lot. “I’ll take you home, Ambrose.”

I’m surprised Caulder knows my name. He and I do not run in the same circles. No one wanted to spend time with me, despite how powerful my parents were—they definitely don’t want to now. He’s older than I am, with much more credence in himself, his magic, and his place in this coven. His family’s rare fire magic is renowned, making them formidable opponents and protectors. He’s in line to be a coven elder one day—if not a High Priest . He shouldn’t be wasting his time on someone like me.

I can’t help but soak up his attention. His charisma is magnetic. The way he walked with this innate confidence in himself. The way he talked with conviction. The way his face drew me in so I’d hang off his every word. He drew me in when I was a kid, and I’ve been hooked ever since. He was my first crush, my only crush.

Everyone either wants to be him or be with him.

I’m no one compared to him .

It takes me a few moments to formulate a response as we carefully walk through the slippery grass.

“Um, I can walk home, it’s okay...” I murmur as I stare at the ground.

He takes in my appearance. My face is wet with tears, probably swollen from crying and beat red. My pale skin makes the redness stand out double. My hands are shaking from not being able to control myself, and I don't have a jacket or the proper boots to walk.

I'm still wearing my pajamas from yesterday...

"You're in no shape to walk. It's snowing. I'll take you home," he gently insists. His voice is smooth, commanding. I can't help but agree.

He takes me to a sleek, expensive black sedan parked in the front of the lot. My family comes from money too, but Mom and Dad weren't as flashy as the Scarboroughs. I never rode in a car with heated leather seats that felt like butter beneath my palms. I melt into the upholstery as he turns out of the cemetery and drives down the main road that takes me to my house.

We sit in silence, because I'm too scared to talk to him. Every now and then he sneaks a glance at me, but I can't make eye contact with him. I'm so embarrassed he's seeing me like this. A weak mess of a man who can't stop crying over his dead parents.

A loser. I'm a mentally unstable crybaby.

I just stare at the footwell as I try not to spiral into tears again.

When we arrive at my house, the realization I never gave him my address hits me. Somehow, he already knew where I lived.

He gets out of the car and opens my door, positioning an umbrella over me so I'm not further drenched by the torrential downpour outside. I fumble to find the door key, unsuccessfully slotting it inside the lock. The scrape of the metal lock on the key is

grating. It's so cold now my whole body shakes. He leans over me, taking it from my hand and unlocking it in one smooth motion.

"I got it," he whispers. I can feel his humid breath ghost over the shell of my ear, and my stomach tightens.

"Th-thank you," I stutter. Being this close to the man I've wanted ever since I was a child makes me nervous. I dreamed about being alone with Caulder, but now that it's happening in reality, when I'm at my worst, I don't know what to do.

The man of my dreams ushers me into my house, turning on the lights. He takes my coat and hangs it on the rack. When we get to the fireplace in the living room, he throws a ball of fire inside that rotates like a spit and warms the room instantly.

"Um...thank you," I mumble. Ugh, I just said that.

He waves his hands over me, from my head, down to my knees and back again. I feel heat seep into my clothes—down to the marrow of my bones—warming me from the inside out. My clothes dry, and I feel somewhat better. Makes me almost forget my parents died.

Caulder slowly walks around the living room, gravitating toward the bookshelf. It's filled with magical texts and grimoires passed down through both sides of my family. He takes his time, running his fingers over the spines and stopping at a black, worn leather spine.

"That's a grimoire. My grandmother's..." I say to fill the silence.

"Oh, I've heard of this book. It's something of a legend in the coven," he responds as he crosses the room.

He sits on the couch, his thick, muscular thighs spread wide. Leaning forward, he rests his forearms on his knees. He gestures for me to sit, and I take a seat close enough to him that it's not rude, but far enough away so I don't embarrass myself any further.

"Ambrose, are you going to be okay by yourself?" His face is etched with worry, and a little furrow forms between his brows.

No, I immediately think. But I can't tell him that.

"I will be, don't worry about me," I lie in an effort to make him feel better. It's nice he cares, but I'm not his problem. I'm no one's problem but my own, now.

"It's okay that you're hurting. When I was a kid, my mom left. I cried every night for months, waiting for her to return, even though I knew she never would." He takes my hand in his, rubbing his thumb over my pulse. "I had my dad and brother, but she took a part of me with her. I still miss her and can only imagine how hard this must be for you."

A tear breaks free, rolling down my cheek. His wistful expression breaks my heart. His father died not long after, if I remember correctly. He's an orphan too, but he's so strong.

I know that no matter how much time passes, I'll still miss my parents... Living without them hasn't been easy. I still see them in every room of this house, like they're ghosts. All my memories with them are alive and well, like spectral beings who constantly remind me they'll never be here to make more.

The floodgate breaks and I almost choke on my sobs.

It is hard.

It's impossible to get up every day and make myself leave my room, knowing they won't be there to greet me. We'll never share a meal again. I'll never have tea with my mother or taste her blueberry scones. Their laughter, their words, endless patience and acceptance of having a defective loser for a son are gone.

The fierce wind outside bangs the tree branches into the window, and the electricity flickers. I can't hold my shit together.

Caulder moves closer, wrapping his arms around me in a tight hug. I cry like a hysterical baby, and he pulls me onto his lap. My face rests on his chest, and I can smell his musky, woody scent. Breathing it in makes me feel safe. He holds me for what seems like an eternity, letting me fall apart in his warm embrace as he rubs my back. His magic surrounds me again, relaxing me with a controlled warmth, and eventually, I wind back down.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out as my shame piles higher, suffocating me. I'm sitting on his lap, for fuck's sake. I need to man up—I've embarrassed myself enough.

I try to stand up, but he pulls me back down and cuddles me to his chest.

"You have no reason to apologize. You can cry as much as you want. Let all your feelings go. I'm here for you." His words vibrate in his chest before wrapping themselves around my heart. It feels so good to have someone to lean on. Someone who makes me feel like I'm not alone.

I rest my cheek on his pec, turning to putty in his embrace. We talk about loss, life, and how things will change going forward. Caulder knows what it's like to lose a parent, and having his comfort right now is keeping me from going off the deep end.

"Be honest with me. How out of control is your magic?" he asks.

“It’s always been a little off, but aside from an incident here and there, it was mostly under control. Now... It’s bad.”

“I overheard your parents talking about it once. Sometimes I have the habit of eavesdropping.” He tips my chin up, and I melt under his intense stare. “You know, I can help you gain control of your magic, give you lessons.”

“You’d do that?” Why would he do anything for me? He barely knows me.

“Yes. People like us have to stick together. You’ll never be alone again, Ambrose,” he promises me before pressing his lips to mine for a lingering, chaste kiss.

His kiss sends sparks of life through me. The shades of gray in the black and white world I’ve been trapped in suddenly have color. I feel alive for the first time in days.

I lean into him to kiss his pink lips. He rubs his tongue along the seam of my mouth, and I open, letting him plunder his way inside. He explores me, claiming me wholly and filling me with hope.

For the first time since my parents’ untimely death, I don’t feel alone. Because Caulder Scarborough is here for me.

AMbrOSE

Two Years Later

The conspicuous closing of a drawer wakes me from a fitful, raucous sleep. I roll from my side onto my back, burying my face in the pillow and exhaling deeply as I stretch. Bits and fragments of dreams flashed in my head throughout the night—breaking glass, dark shadows, a raven cawing in the woods. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I think about what they may mean.

As a natural witch, my magic isn't divination or sight, but I knew those were dark, ill omens that meant loss, the shattering of the known, secrecy, and hidden agendas. Or maybe I'm being paranoid and letting my stress burrow under my skin. Things with Caulder have been different the past few months.

He used to come over for dinner often and we'd spend hours talking, watching movies, and taking pleasure in each other's bodies. Then we'd have magic lessons in the morning where he'd teach me ways to control my magic. Caulder used to make me feel loved. Safe. Protected from the world. Now, he only comes over once a week at most, and is usually gone before I even wake up.

Today is a rare sight. He stands near the bed, buttoning his shirt. He makes sure it's tucked into his pants before he dons his long, black suit coat. The crisp lines and smooth texture of the fabric make him look regal. Important. Caulder wants everything to look perfect, all the time.

Your image is everything, Ambrose. First impressions mean everything, he always says. His look is a far cry from my own jeans, tees, and cardigan sweaters.

I get out of bed and hug him around the waist from behind, laying a lingering kiss on his shoulder blade. "Good morning, handsome."

His body stiffens, and it feels like a slap in the face. I don't know why his behavior toward me changed. It feels as if a chasm grew between us inch by inch, slowly pushing him away from me. One I can't bridge no matter how hard I try. Knowing he's distancing himself from me makes me feel so fucking sad. Useless. Broken.

"Get off me," he grits out, pushing me off him. I stumble back and almost fall onto the floor. "I have to go." He gingerly places his wide brim black hat on his head.

My heart's already breaking, just like it always does when he leaves. In the privacy of our bedrooms, we're lovers, but outside it, he's High Priest Scarborough. Our relationship is a secret, even though I don't want to hide it anymore.

"We have a lesson this morning, though," I remind him. "You canceled our last few and I'm looking forward to this one."

"I have more important things to do today," he responds. Great to know I'm not a priority...

Caulder comes to my home acting sweet, fucks me, then when the sun rises, he's back to being emotionless and distant toward me. He wasn't always like this. My heart crumbles every time he pushes me away.

"You don't want breakfast before you go?" I ask as a last ditch effort to spend time with him.

I try to keep my tone light and my eyes dry, but the exasperated frown on his face makes it difficult.

“Please take a hint. I say no every time you ask. I need to prepare for tonight’s Samhain meeting.” He doesn’t even look at me as he talks... he just stares beyond me at the wall, as if I’m not even worth making eye contact with.

I hate it when he treats me the way everyone else does. Like I’m not worth knowing. Just a piece of meaningless garbage.

I want to lash out, beg him to tell me what I did to make him act this way toward me. But the last time I brought it up, he told me I was imagining things. The time before that, I was accused of making up shit to complain about to ruin our perfect evening together. My magic swirls inside me, pushing at me from the inside to escape, but I use the techniques he taught me to control it.

Controlled breathing. Fortitude of mind. Calming thoughts.

He walks toward the door without hugging me or kissing me goodbye. Tears well in my eyes and I sniffle to hold them in. His loud sigh echoes in the quiet room, and he makes his way back, pecking me on the cheek.

“I don’t have time for dramatics, darling. I’ll see you tonight after the meeting.”

His words do little to make me feel better, though. It doesn’t take away the rejection or pain I feel. It doesn’t make me feel less alone.

The sunset peaks through the open shutters of the meeting house, combining with sacred candlelight to give the space a warm, dim glow. High Priest Scarborough, as he insists I call him in public, stands at the raised platform at the front.

The meeting should be over by now, but he hasn't adjourned it yet. He clears his throat, getting everyone's attention.

"As your High Priest, it's my job to lead this coven. I've taken us out of dark, unpredictable times, and guided us toward the light. I've made it my mission to bring us back to our roots—to strengthen our craft. To make us stronger and grow our numbers. The long days I spend making sure every member of this flock is thriving are worth it, because our combined magic is a gift I cherish," he says in a measured pace.

Everyone in the audience hangs on his every word, and the insecurities I felt this morning fade away. His words make me swell with pride. My man's hard work and determination unified a coven that was so close to falling apart after my parents' deaths. We lost our way, but he helped us find our path again.

"My vision of a unified magical family is reflected in every face I see before me tonight. Seeing us all gathered here today reminds me of how I was able to make this a reality, through the support of very special, dedicated people who care about this coven. Especially the support of one person in particular."

Whispers break out across the crowd, and I hold my breath. Where is he going with this?

"This person is very near and dear to my heart and offers the love and support I need to do the hard work. Gives me strength when I feel tired. Lends me faith in myself when I feel defeated. As I look over this coven—our family—every week, I can't help but think of how I want to start a family with this person. To build a legacy together that will watch over this amazing community."

As he talks, the ember of hope inside me grows into a burning flame. He's finally going to tell the coven about us. I knew he'd do it in his own time, when he was

ready. That's why he was so nervous earlier!

“This morning, I proposed to Flora Lawrence, and she was gracious enough to say yes. Over the past few months, I've fallen so deeply for her, and I know without a shadow of a doubt she is the woman I want to build my legacy with. Please come up to the stage, darling.”

AMbrOSE

Everyone claps and cheers as sparks of magic sail through the air. The joy in the room is palpable for everyone except me.

My blood boils in pure rage. The contents of my lonely breakfast churn in my stomach as bile rises up my throat. It takes every shred of control and dignity I have to sit through the meeting, and not cause a magical catastrophe. The last thing I need is to draw attention to myself and have all eyes on me.

Flora Lawrence floats onto the stage, in her beautiful black lace tea-length dress. She looks like a 1950s movie vixen, with her glowing skin, red lips, and beautiful, smooth hair. She looks positively radiant, smiling at everyone as she loops her arm in his. He kisses her on the cheek and I want to vomit.

How long has he been seeing her behind my back?

She looks at him with such joy in her eyes, like he hangs the moon. The same way I look at him... He gives her an indulgent smile. He never smiles at me like that, or at all, honestly. Every time I brought up the subject of marriage or children, he'd pointedly shut the conversation down. He told me that wasn't in the cards for us, because he was so busy leading the coven.

It suddenly dawns on me that they must have been seeing each other for a while if they got engaged today. Their familiarity with each other seems so romantic. A life

together was never in the cards for us .

I was never meant to be the one standing on the stage next to him.

He wasn't seeing her behind my back. I was the secret. The side piece he kept behind closed doors. Who he only visited in the middle of the night with no witnesses to see it. The few times we did do anything outside either of our homes was when we'd grab lunch at a coffee shop or a quiet restaurant on the outskirts of town. Both places where when people saw us, they'd only think we were two coven members sharing a meal and talking craft. Not two lovers...

How can I be so stupid? How did I let myself fall into this... thing ...I had with him?

As soon as the meeting ends, I storm out without saying goodbye to anyone or looking at him. My broken heart was already everyone's entertainment when my parents passed away. I don't want anyone seeing my shame. Or the broken, sharp edges of my heart as they fall to the floor.

I can't bear to see the cold aloofness in his eyes anymore. When we're in public, he looks upon me like I'm a stranger—it feels like a knife to my heart. And seeing the way he gazes at her was the dagger that sliced it apart.

How dare he? How could he?

I spent the past two years of my life as his dirty little secret, more than happy hiding our relationship because he liked to keep his private life private .

That was the excuse he gave me, and I was depressed and desperate enough for affection to believe it. I stuck around for months, waiting for him to finally make good on his whispered promises to claim me publicly.

As soon as I'm elected as High Priest, I'll tell everyone about us. I'm so stressed out right now and need to focus on this.

I do love you, but I'm so bogged down with running the coven. I'll tell everyone after the Solstice is over.

You mean everything to me. I'll tell everyone soon, don't worry. Please let me do it on my own time.

I should have known his words were empty. He never meant to make good on his promises to me. He never wanted to bring us into the light.

As I walk through the darkened woods back to my cottage, my hold on my magic breaks for a moment. My anger manifests as lightning crackling through the sky. A chilling gale of wind whips around me, climbing right up my back under my sweater. The trees lining the path shake, and their dried leaves rattle an ominous, echoing chorus.

I revel in the coldness. It stokes my anger, keeping me from breaking down until I finally lock my front door behind me.

My legs are so weak, they barely carry me to my bedroom, where I collapse on the floor in tears. I spend the next hour sobbing and gasping for breath as I break down.

I loved him. I gave him every part of myself. Told him things I'd never shared with another living soul. Showed him parts of myself I kept hidden under lock and key.

When High Priest Smythe passed away a couple of weeks after my parents, I used my family's resources to rally the coven behind Caulder as our new High Priest. I fought the naysayers and did things to secure his power that I regret... passed rumors... gathered and fabricated evidence against his competition.

The wool suddenly lifts from my eyes, and I realize that he used me. For years, he took advantage of me—my money. My devotion. My loneliness. My blind adoration for him. The day my parents passed away, he targeted and manipulated me into thinking he cared about me.

I rip off Caulder's sweater he left behind last week, breathing in his deep citrus cologne as I rub my thumb over the soft knit. His scent usually brings back memories of the times we spent together. But those memories are tarnished, vile reminders of a love that was unrequited. What we had wasn't real. It was a bastardization of what love should be.

I throw his sweater into the fireplace and watch the flames engulf it. The fabric slowly burns, turning to ash.

Caulder Scarborough is dead to me now.

I never want to see his lying, cheating face again. I have half a mind to expose him in front of the entire coven and ruin his engagement. But deep down, I know it would do nothing to harm his perfectly crafted reputation. I have no proof—it would be his word against mine.

Who will believe the crazy orphan whose parents' death mentally destroyed him over the High Priest? Who will side with the loser who can't control his magic over the beloved leader of our coven who restored our former glory?

I laugh to myself, because if I weren't me, I wouldn't believe me, either. Everyone is trapped so deeply in his sticky web. They're all fooled by the facade he shows the world. The sharp suits, fancy car, and fake kindness and generosity he flaunts. I don't stand a chance against him.

I grab a suitcase from my closet. All I need is clothes, books, and distance. If I'm

ever going to get over my parents' death and Caulder's betrayal, I need to leave this place, find somewhere new, and reinvent myself. The idea of a warm, sunny climate outside of New England, where it doesn't snow, is appealing.

As I pull the zipper close, the click of the front door unlocking echoes through my silent home. I forgot I gave him a key to the house. The sound of his boots thumping through the hallway rankles me. I don't want to hear his apologies or excuses. Before I can think of anything to say, he stops in the open doorway to my bedroom, scanning the sight before him. His eyes fall on the suitcase, and his jaw tightens.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"That's not your concern anymore. Enjoy building your legacy with your beautiful bride," I calmly state as I take the handle of my suitcase.

His fingers dig into my biceps as he grabs my arm to stop me. He laughs, like I told a funny joke. "Darling, You're being dramatic. Unpack your things. I brought Thai to eat while we catch up on our show."

Excuse me? What the actual fuck is happening right now?

"Get your hand off me and leave my house. I never want to see you again." My voice is firm. The minute he said her name at the meeting, he gave her the future I so desperately wanted for two years. He ended us.

His grip tightens, holding me in place. "Don't make me tell you twice. Go plate the food, and I'll queue up the show."

He shoves me through my bedroom door, parting me from my suitcase. He bullies me into the living room before I manage to dig my feet into the carpet and stop him.

“How about you take the food to your fiancée, Flora ? She seems like the type to plate food. I bet she’d give you a linen napkin and even pour the soda into a chilled glass with ice.”

“Keep her name out of your mouth,” he shouts at me as he grips my face in his hand. His spittle lands on my face as his fingertips and thumb dig into my cheek. I try to break free from his hold, but he pins me against the wall.

“Flora,” I taunt him. “Soon to be Flora fucking Scarborough.”

He releases me, slapping me across the face so hard my head bounces off the wall. Then he slams me into the wall with his forearm across my chest. Sharp pain blares through my skull, and the aftershocks almost make me fall to the ground. I can feel the sting of his signet ring scratching my cheek and the warm trickle of blood rolling down to my jaw.

Caulder doesn’t seem shocked by what he’s done. If anything, he’s angrier.

“Look what you made me do!”

“Yeah, I made you string me along for years and cheat. I forced you to put your hands on me like a piece of human garbage. I’m the reason you’re an asshole. Fuck you ,” I spit.

“You knew what this was.” His words feel worse than the slap did.

“How dare you,” I seethe, my breathing unsteady as I try to hold my temper. “You used me—hid me like a dirty fucking secret. Took everything I could possibly give you and then cast me aside when I was all used up.”

He smiles at me, as if he’s impressed I figured him out. Disgust claws its way up my

throat. My anger boils, pressing at me from the inside and making me feel as if I'm moments away from exploding.

“You're not good enough to stand by my side, Ambrose. You're a loner. An orphan. An embarrassment who can't control his magic. You're crazy . Why would I pick someone like you when I can have the daughter of the richest member of the coven?”

My mouth drops. This man is a leech. I'm not useful to him anymore, he's onto the next source. I meant nothing to him.

“When I realized I couldn't open your grimoire, I wasted two years trying to tap into your magic. You were supposed to be my weapon, but you're nothing but a defective freak!” he shouts. “But don't worry, I'm not done with you, darling . You're still good for the occasional fuck.”

My magic spikes and a bolt of lightning shatters the glass in the window across from us. It misses him by mere inches, crashing into the wall next to me. Shards litter the floor and loud thunder shakes the house and the ground beneath us. Hailstones batter the roof, their pings turning into a cacophony that sets his teeth on edge.

Caulder slams me against the wall again. My head feels as if it's going to split open. “Stop it right now!” he bellows.

“ No ,” I rasp. “Get the fuck away from me. Never darken my life again, or I'll ruin your engagement. I'll tell the entire coven how you'd fuck me. The messed up shit you like to do. How you'd come on my face. I'll recite the dirty shit you said loud enough that the whole world can hear me and make your life a living hell.”

He grabs my throat with a ferocity I've never seen in his eyes before, breaking his cool, stony exterior. He squeezes right over my windpipe and I can't breathe.

“You’ll do no such thing. If you utter one word about us, I’ll put you in a coffin next to your parents.”

His face is set in a dead serious expression. I have no doubt he’d kill me. But I would rather be dead than be caught under his thumb for another minute.

I channel my rage, magic, and fear into the Heartleaf Philodendron plant sitting on the bookshelf, willing its vines to grow. They reach out, winding around the coffee table and over the couch, wrapping themselves around Caulder’s throat. They follow my thoughts, tightening around his neck.

His grip loosens, and I run out of the room, only stopping to take my grandmother’s Grimoire off the bookshelf before I leave.

“Don’t you dare take that book! It should be mine ,” he screams, ripping the vines away as he stumbles toward me. I hit him over the head with it, and he falls to his knees. “I’m going to wring your neck and watch the life drain out of you. You can run from me, but I’ll find you, darling.”

He cackles as I burst through my front door into the cool night air.

As I run toward the woods behind my house, I pray into the universe—to whoever is listening—that he doesn’t follow me. Because if he catches me, hurting me is the least he’ll do.

“You’ll regret this!” he shouts from somewhere behind me. I have no clue if he’s following me, so I run as fast as I can, weaving through the trees until I reach a small clearing with a singular tree. It has peeling silver bark and blood-red leaves. It stands out from the other trees in the forest, whose leaves are dying as we near winter. These leaves are vibrant, as if they’re frozen in time.

I collapse at the base of its thick trunk, placing the book on the ground as I stare up at the canopy above me. I'm so angry—at myself, Caulder, and the world. I feel an angry, potent magic simmering under my skin. It courses through me, thrumming in my veins.

I'm so tired of being sad and angry, of dealing with Caulder's abuse. How dare he use me and throw me away like I mean nothing. He took two years of my life I'll never get back. He was the only person who made me feel safe and loved since my parents passed. He took away my peace of mind.

An ice cold gust of wind knocks the book open, and the pages turn on their own to a spell in the beginning of the book. An illustration of an angular, handsome face shrouded in shadows sits at the top left of the page. His eyes, the tip of his nose, and his lips are clear, but the rest of his face is lost to detailed, artistic shading. The entry isn't as long as others I've read in the past. The words are a narrow, slanted script and the ink on the page is lighter than the pages in the back of the book, so the spell must be old—from a generation of Stone witches long gone.

The Shadow Demon

Shadow demons are chaotic, devious beings, and can develop a proprietary nature with the summoner if they prove worthy. This sense of ownership can serve as a means of protection, and the demon will protect you by any means necessary. There are no limits or boundaries they will spare in their pursuit to protect their summoner. Beware of summoning shadow demons, as they have a way of bonding with their summoner that makes them difficult to banish.

Powerful, decisive, and dangerous, this being should only be summoned by a skilled witch in dire circumstances for protection or revenge against someone who wronged you. If the shadow demons feel you are not worthy, they see it as an offense and refuse your summoning. In worst case scenarios, they will end the witch's life ...

As I read my ancestor's words, a crazy idea takes root in my mind...

All Caulder cares about is power. He's unhinged enough to do anything to get my family's grimoire. A shadow demon will protect me from him.

I'm tired of being Caulder's dirty little secret. Of being the crazy loner guy he was able to take advantage of so easily. I'm done with his hurtful words and emotional abuse. I refuse to suffer him a moment longer.

From now on, I'm going to be his worst fucking nightmare.

I skim below to the summoning ritual and follow the instructions to a tee. I gather red fallen leaves from the tree in front of me and use my elemental magic to light a small fire. The flames dance in the darkness, casting a shadow on the ground.

Then I take my keys out of my pocket, flicking open my utility knife. I carefully slash my palm and let my blood well up, then drip it into the flames with intention as I envision my end goal. When the flame burns a light blue, I chant the incantation.

"Protect me with shadow and darkness, for I am worthy. Protect me with shadow and darkness, for I am worthy. Protect me with shadow and darkness, for I am worthy. Protect me with shadow and darkness, for I am worthy. Protect me with shadow and darkness, for I am worthy."

The temperature in the air plummets, with an icy stillness falling over the forest. It seems as if it's frozen, holding its breath as it waits for what happens next. Bolts of lightning electrify the sky, followed by loud claps of thunder that shake the ground. A silver bolt webs within the darkened sky, then touches down a few feet away from me, leaving behind a cloud of smoke.

When the smoke dissipates, a large male figure shrouded in darkness is left behind.

My stomach clenches, then drops. His broad shoulders and massive frame are proof enough that he can end my life if he chooses to—snap my neck like a twig with the least amount of effort. This demon is beyond dangerous. He towers over me like an imposing statue carved from marble, immovable and silent, standing eerily still as he takes me in.

The clouds move, allowing moonlight to illuminate him. Tendrils of darkness curl away from his perfect, angular face to reveal the most beautiful man I've ever seen. He has lightly tanned skin, jet black hair, and a jaw so hard it could cut diamonds. His high cheekbones wouldn't seem out of place on the cover of a magazine, nor would his bright gray eyes that sparkle like gemstones in the flickering firelight.

His body is bare, spare the opaque ribbons of night that cover his groin and wrap around his hips like a makeshift pair of briefs. His muscles and smooth planes are on display, making desire and fear swirl in my stomach.

He inhales deeply, and I involuntarily flinch. His eyes narrow on me, and I instantly regret my decision. He smiles wide, his plush lips curling in amusement. Demons and supernatural creatures have heightened senses and abilities.

He can probably smell my fear...and my arousal. He knows I made a huge mistake summoning him... I'm not worthy.

He steps toward me, and a low, preternatural growl fills the space. It echoes, like a unison of dozens of voices merging together. The sound infiltrates me down to my marrow, sending chills down my spine.

I realize that I summoned this perilous creature without casting a protection spell for myself or any barrier magic. Not even a simple salt circle or crystal chamber. There's nothing trapping him in one place. He can easily rip me to shreds. Limb by limb.

I was so desperate for protection, I made myself the prey.

My heart vibrates inside my chest. I can't breathe. This... thing ... is going to kill me.

When he takes a second step toward me, my flight or fight response kicks in. I snap up from the ground and run as fast as I can past the clearing into the trees. I hear heavy footsteps behind me. And even though I'm too scared to turn around and look, I know it's him.

My heart pounds harder, battering my chest as my vision blurs with tears. The snap of the leaves and twigs crunching underfoot as I run faster in a desperate attempt to escape is deafening.

I run as fast as I can, trying to dodge tree limbs from above and roots on the ground. The uneven forest floor makes me stumble, but I right myself and keep pushing forward. With every step, my head feels as if it's splitting open, but I can't let the pain stop me. I need to survive.

There's another clearing up ahead, an old cemetery I used to read in as a child. The decrepit grave markers and headstones have long crumbled and faded. Some of the graves aren't even marked. But the stone mausoleum has stayed intact. I climb up the wide steps and open the door. A feral, deep growl behind me makes my chest cave in—it's coming from right behind me.

When I turn my head, my fears are confirmed. He's charging at me, ascending the steps with ease. I can try to escape. Hide. But I know it's no use.

How can I possibly outrun a demon?

I run to the very back of the mausoleum until I'm cornered by a large stone crypt on a raised platform. He steps inside the small, cold space, seeming larger than life. He

barely fits in here without having to crouch.

He steps toward me, until my back is flush to the crypt behind me, the stone cold and rough. The moonlight and stars visible in the open doorway are extinguished by a creeping, slithering shadow, throwing the entire mausoleum into a deep darkness. I can barely see a foot in front of me, and the other crypts are mere outlines.

Tendrils of black darkness wrap around me and bind my arms behind me. I'm unable to see the shadow demon, but I can feel him. He's close.

His hand clamps down on my shoulder, and this instant connection thrums to life between us. He invades my senses, bringing me to my knees at his feet. I simultaneously fear him and want him. My desire for him makes me want to worship him.

I hear a gravelly, rumbling laugh right next to my ear. When I look out of the corner of my eye, I see nothing but darkness. I feel something cold and rough, like the pad of a finger, stroke my cheek.

"You summoned me, witch," he states, his voice raspy, unnatural—like a million voices at one time and unlike anything I've ever heard before. "Yet you run from me."

I tremble, unable to speak as my fear immobilizes me. The same cold roughness from before grabs my jaw and forces it upward. I see the faint outline of his face and his icy gray eyes peering down at me. His full lips are set, the smirk from before long gone.

"Speak, summoner. Explain yourself," he orders.

I try to form words, but choke on my own sobs. "I—I—Please?—"

He kneels in front of me, still towering over me from his sheer massiveness. Holding my face with both hands, he uses his thumbs to wipe my tears away. I feel a probing at my mind, like a soft knock at the doorway of my thoughts.

He softly whispers, Let me in. Except his lips aren't moving. I think I only hear him in my mind. Or my fear is making me delusional.

The feeling becomes more insistent until I yield and let him in. The adrenaline coursing through me is cut off, and the walls around me cease to exist as I'm plunged into a silent, empty vacuum of darkness. My own memories fly before my eyes like a movie reel.

Meeting Caulder at my parents' graves. Sitting in his lap. The evenings he'd come over to cook dinner with me and watch movies. The nights he'd sleep in my bed and we'd take pleasure in each other. The mornings he'd make his excuses before leaving. Text messages that went unanswered. Caulder ignoring me in public, laughing with the other witches about how awkward I am. His cold, dead stares when I'd try to talk to him. His dismissive laughter when I'd ask him why he treated me like that. The fights, his cold shoulders that lasted for weeks. Him yelling at me to know my place.

Emotions overwhelm me as each memory plays, as if I'm experiencing them all over again. His rejection and mistreatment sting even worse the second time around. They pile higher and higher, until I'm choking, unable to breathe or beg the demon to stop. When I get to the memories of what happened tonight, I feel my heart ripping out of my chest.

His engagement announcement. Flora's radiant glow and his indulgent smile. Him showing up at my house unannounced, yelling at me, slamming me against the wall, and smacking me. The blood that ran down my cheek...

The demon growls again, but this time it's a ferocious, angry timber. The sound is so sharp it breaks me out of my spiral. The darkness recedes, uncovering the moon and stars in the open doorway. Sound slowly starts to filter back, and I can see his face as he stands above me.

His attractiveness is undeniable. A rough, primal manliness blended with an ethereal beauty only a creature from Hell can possess. Despite the grimace and clear disgust on his face toward me, I can't help but desire him. I'm ashamed he knows how weak I am, how unworthy I am to summon him and ask for his protection. We stare at each other for several moments in silence while tendrils of darkness weave around him like a cloak.

"I see your pain, summoner, and feel it like it's my own," he gently whispers as his eyes bore into mine. "No one as beautiful or delicate as you deserve to be treated that way."

The compassion blooming on his stone face brings me to tears. His displeasure wasn't because of my weakness. It was directed at Caulder. His anger on my behalf is vindicating, like a huge weight has been lifted from my chest.

Someone knows and understands.

I feel him probing at my mind again, but this time he doesn't need to coax me. I open myself to him willingly, and he pours himself inside me, disappearing from sight.

He's possessing me.

The feeling of him infiltrating my mind is a fullness I could never describe, a high I never want to come down from. He fills me with a sense of calm I've never experienced before. All the background noise in my mind—my insecurities, sadness, self-loathing, and loneliness—stop. The feeling of complete tranquility is so foreign

to me that it's uncomfortable at first. Then it turns to a warm, syrupy bliss.

Do you like the way it feels when I'm inside you like this? he asks, a hint of smugness in his voice. The way I possess you and take all of your pain away?

A lazy smile blooms across my face. Yes, I think .

You will never be mistreated again, Ambrose. I'll make sure of that. I can see his stern expression and glowing gray eyes in my mind. He's like a god amongst men.

I've never encountered this demon before, but I know he is a creature of his word. He'll protect me.

How do you know my name, and what do I call you? I ask. How can any words accurately describe such a being?

Because you are mine , summoner. From this day forth, we will be bonded together. I am the demon of shadow and darkness. You may call me Ciarán.

He leaves my body, materializing in his corporal form again. His pale skin shines in the moonlight, and his gray eyes are alight with a passion that can only come from one thing— devotion . This demon gazes at me as if I'm a treasure, someone worthy of cherishing. I've never had someone look at me this way before, and the feeling is intoxicating.

He lifts me from my prostrate position at his feet, seating me on the crypt behind me. Parting my trembling legs, he steps between them and places his hands on my knees.

"I'm going to protect you. You will never know pain or suffering again. You're mine, Ambrose Stone. My summoner. Tell me you're mine."

“I’m yours,” I whisper.

He tips my chin up, giving me the perfect view of his face. The illumination from the moonlight behind him makes him look like a dark angel who fell to earth just to protect me.

“Say it again. Louder . Who do you belong to? I want to hear the voice that summoned me out of the darkness.” His full lips tilt into a devious smile. I love the way he smiles at me.

“I’m yours. I belong to you, only you.” His hands run further up my thighs, so close to my aching dick. I lick my bottom lip without thought. I want to taste him.

As if he read my mind, he takes my jaw in his hand and bends down until our lips are only centimeters apart. His grip is firm, but gentle.

“Once I kiss you, our bond is sealed, summoner. I will always be with you. I won’t share you. The minute you kiss me, I’ll find Caulder and end his life for what he did to you. Every single person who mistreated you will experience excruciating agony. Nod if you understand me.”

Without a second thought, I nod. I want Caulder to suffer. I want my revenge.

Our lips meet in a clash of tongues and passion. He collars my throat with his massive hand, tilting my face slightly to the side. His tongue dominates my mouth, eliciting a soft whimper from deep within me as he lightly squeezes the sides of my neck.

I smooth my hands down his pecs, over his sculpted abs. They feel like marble under my touch. I ghost one down to the shadows that cover him, and he takes my hand in his.

“Not here. I want to corrupt your pure, light soul in a private place. A place where you can scream as loudly as you want while I bring you into the darkness.”

His words make me feel owned. Desired .

If being with him is straying from the light, I'll follow him blindly. For he is the darkness...and in the dark is where I thrive.

CIARÁN

For years, I watched Ambrose Stone as he took shortcuts through the forest. The highlight of my day was seeing the beautiful young man with blond hair, pale lips, long legs, and a downcast face. Not once has he ever looked happy or smiled. He never had company to walk with him. I knew there was darkness in his life. He reminded me of a fallen angel plucked from Heaven, cast down to earth to suffer for eternity.

I'd wait around the clearing, just to see his face. I wanted him. I knew from the first moment I saw him that he was mine to protect. Mine to keep.

But unless I was somehow summoned to this realm, I'd have to settle for glimpses of his face in passing. More powerful demons, like myself, can see beyond the veil that separates our worlds. A small percentage of the powerful among us can send energy. But unless a magical being summons us, we cannot cross over.

When he ran through the trees tonight, scared for his life with tears in his eyes, his magic was so strong it called out to me, begging for help. The tears streaming down his face made me murderous. I want to hunt down his enemies, quarter them, and present their heads to him on a silver platter.

How could anyone treat my summoner this way—push him to the point of tears?

As he stumbled at the base of my tree, I knew it was my chance to finally claim him.

I sent him a gale of chilling wind, opening his book to the page his ancestor wrote decades ago, warning him of my kind.

But he didn't heed her warning. Now I'm here, and nothing can keep me from him.

As I invaded his mind and saw the atrocities he endured, I silently promised both of us I'd do everything in my power to protect him.

Avenge him.

Ambrose Stone will never be alone again. The witch who wronged him and the community that failed him will beg for his forgiveness before I end them.

Picking him up from the crypt, I carefully cradle his lithe body against my chest.

"I'll take you home."

Tonight is for passion, for leading him down a dark, one way path to corruption. I want to show him how good it will feel to have a demon inside him, in more ways than one.

Tomorrow, the reckoning will begin.

"Grimoire," he purrs as he burrows into my chest.

I see the book sitting askew in a pile of leaves and levitate it to me before we go back to his house. Ambrose is tired, but not asleep. His eyes blink slowly as his breathing evens out.

I probe his mind again and hear his thoughts as if they were my own.

Safe .

He feels protected enough that he can relax. Let his body heal from the trauma he went through tonight.

His home is a small cottage surrounded by trees and beautiful flowers. The front door is cracked open, revealing the darkness inside. There are no lights on, just an eerily stillness. Caulder may be waiting to finish what he started. I'll burn the entire world to the ground before I let him lay another finger on Ambrose. Nothing will ever harm my summoner again.

I stand at the doorway and weave my shadows through the room. They slither down every hallway, inside each room, in search of any form of life. When they find nothing, I'm satisfied that no one is hiding.

When I get inside, I turn on the light. The entire house is trashed. The glass-top coffee table is smashed, with large shards sticking out of the carpet. The bookshelf has been turned over, and some of the texts are torn apart. Multiple houseplants are uprooted, their pots smashed and dirt in heaps.

The part of the kitchen I can see from here doesn't look any better. The cabinets are wide open. Broken plates and glasses cover the worn floor. There's food and empty takeout containers spilled over the table and chairs. This destruction has Caulder's name all over it.

"My house..." Ambrose squeaks as he peeks up from my chest. "It's ruined."

"It can be fixed," I assure him as I put him down and hand him his grimoire.

Slowly, he walks toward the upended shelf and picks up the pieces of a broken porcelain figurine. It looks like a boy dressed in blue, reading a book.

“My parents gave me this when I was a kid. I used to spend all my time reading in the woods, and they said it reminded them of me.”

I extend my open palms, and he hands it to me. Using my magic, I fuse the pieces together again, as if it was never broken. His small smile takes my breath away. I’d spoil him every minute of every day just to see him smile.

I channel my magic on a larger scale and reset his apartment. I move from room to room, putting everything back in its rightful place. Everything looks tidy and clean by the time I’m done.

“You fixed it,” he says with a tone of astonishment. I set his figurine in the middle of the coffee table.

“I said I would. You’ll find I’m a demon of my word,” I reply in a hungry voice.

I haven't forgotten my promise from earlier. Tonight, Ambrose Stone will forget every man who came before me. He’ll only know my touch, my kiss. He’ll crave my depravity and I’ll be more than happy to provide him with it.

Levitating him off the ground, I direct him down a hallway, into a large bedroom. With a wave of my hand, I start a roaring flame in the fireplace in the corner, to provide the room with some warmth and light. Then I lie him out on a plush four poster bed. My shadows bind each of his hands and feet to a wooden column. Seeing him laid out like an offering makes me so feral I lose control of my appearance. My metallic horns erupt from my head. They curl slightly back and away from my face, with a slight curve.

“Your horns are beautiful,” he murmurs as his eyes travel their length.

I climb into his bed, kneeling between his spread legs. His hard, aching cock stands at

attention, as if it's waiting for me. I snap my fingers, and his clothes disappear. His naked body, even with bruising, is a sight to behold. Lithe, compact muscles. Smooth alabaster skin. I wave my hand over him, and his bruises, scrapes, and dried blood disappear. His head trauma is healed, too.

He shouldn't have to carry the remnants of abuse. Any future marks I leave on his skin will be reminders of how he belongs to me. Of the pleasure I bring him.

"You're beautiful," I say as I lean on my forearms and kiss over his pulse.

I trail my lips down his neck, alternating between kisses and light bites. Every time my teeth sink into his flesh, he writhes and moans a little louder, until his sounds fill the room. I bite harder each time, passing his collarbone before I take his nipple into my mouth. I roll it between my teeth, then lave the nub with my tongue.

"Please," he begs as he bucks his hips off the mattress. "I need more." My thigh brushes against his cock and I feel his wetness on my skin. His green eyes shimmer with need.

"Beg me," I order as I grind my stomach into his length, creating sparks of the electric friction he craves.

"Please—Ciarán—I need to feel you inside me," he babbles, grinding himself into me.

"You want me inside you? You're addicted to it, aren't you?" I smirk as he frantically nods his head.

I probe his mind, and he allows me to fill him with my presence. Instead of staying in his mind like the last time, I flood his system and weave my way through every vein and nerve in his body. We're intertwined as one being. My magic pulses through him

gently, like an electrical current. He arches his back off the bed, pulling on my shadow restraints as he groans in pure pleasure.

Each pulse of magic I send through him gets a little stronger. His moans get louder. Sweat trickles down his smooth, flat stomach and his cheeks pinken with arousal. I bring him closer and closer, right to the edge of his release. His pre-cum beads at his flushed tip and rolls down his shaft. I swipe a finger through it and bring his essence to my mouth. He tastes like pure addiction. I'll never be satiated, no matter how much of him I consume.

On the last few pulses, I wrap a shadow around his throat, momentarily cutting his air supply. His heart pounds faster, and his pupils dilate as his arousal magnifies.

“Writhe for me, summoner. Feel me inside you, controlling every beat of your heart. I hold your pleasure and your life in my hands,” I rasp as I control my innate urge to permanently stay inside him and never leave the perfection of his body again.

Seeing him in this state affects me just as much as him. Bringing him pleasure—seeing him coming apart from my ministrations—turns me on, too. It brings me to my most demonic state.

When he's close to finishing, I let go completely. I leave him through his mouth in the form of an opaque burst of shadows. When I materialize again, I lie next to him. The shadows around my groin dissipate, revealing my knotted, ridged cock. His eyes widen as they roam over it from base to tip.

“Fuck... Open my bedside table drawer. There's a bottle of lube in there. I need you to prep me,” he insists.

I find the lube in the drawer, and place it on the beside table. I break my shadows so he can move freely.

“Get on your hands and knees. Stick that ass in the air for me,” I coax him.

He follows my instructions, pushing his round cheeks as high as he can until his face and chest are flush with the mattress. I part his cheeks, revealing his hole. My hole.

“Such a perfect, pink hole for me to destroy,” I whisper, trailing my shadows over his puckered skin. Little goosebumps prick his back as he shivers from my cold touch. “Tell me how bad you want me to stretch your hole, summoner. How full you’ll feel when I push inside you to the hilt.”

“I want you to destroy me,” he whines. “Fucking ruin me, my demon, please !”

I bend down and lick my forked tongue over his hole, and his sharp gasp is music to my ears. He tastes like pure ecstasy—like a budding addiction I’ll never be able to shake. His ass is a feast I want to gorge myself on for eternity. The moans and whispers he makes as I flick his sensitive pucker make my cock ache for something to plow into. I want to hold myself back, be gentle with him for our first time, but my self control dwindles when faced with the perfection of Ambrose’s body.

“Oh fuck. Fuck. Yes!” he shouts as I drive my tongue inside him, loosening his tight ass.

With each thrust, he melts, babbling louder and faster until I can barely understand him. His body starts to shake with pleasure. I pull away and grab the lube.

“Are you ready to feel me inside you, summoner? Do you want to feel me corrupt you from the inside out?”

“Yes,” he moans, pushing his ass toward me. “I want you so deep inside me we become one, Ciarán.”

His words finally break the tenuous control I had on my form. My tail springs out, and I feel my facial features harden. I peek in the mirror on the wall and see my white, glowing eyes. My shadows swirl, filling the room with translucent black ribbons. I wind them around his arms and legs, his throat. A tendril slides over his eyes, blocking his view.

“If you want me to stop, tell me. I’ll never make you feel the wrong kind of pain, my little witch.”

He moans as I rub soothing circles into his back. I take my tail in hand, smoothing lube over it before bringing it to his rim. He pushes back, and I hold his hips still while pushing inside him. I fill him slowly, inch by inch.

“Do you feel my tail stretching you open, my dirty little witch? Are you a whore for my tail?”

“Yes, it’s so thick,” he exhales as I push further inside him. “More, more, more.”

I pull out, much to his dismay, then slide back in. His back arches as he meets my thrust.

I spank his ass, reveling in how his hole strangles my tail. “You’re such a greedy little whore. Just wait until my cock splits you open.”

I ghost over a spongy, soft spot inside him and he tightens around me again.

“Yes,” he gasps as I spank his ass a second time. “Fuck, fuck fuck! I’m so close!”

I pull out. The first time I make my summoner come, it’ll be around my cock.

Moving him over, I sit with my back flush to the headboard and my legs spread open.

I motion for him to kneel between them.

“Take me into your mouth and swallow me—get me wet.”

He licks his lips, then lowers himself and wraps them around the head. He sucks me into his warm, wet mouth little by little, until he can lick the underside of my cock.

Groaning, I thread my fingers through his ashy blond hair, giving it a slight tug. I sit back and let him work me over at his own pace. His head bobs up and down in a steady rhythm as he sucks me in.

“Go down as far as you can, summoner. Feel my demon cock hit the back of your throat.”

With wide eyes, he relaxes his throat and takes me deep. He grabs my hand, placing it on his head. I push down until he gags. His spit coats me, dripping down to my knot.

“Fuck, Ambrose,” I growl as he rubs his hand over my knot, squeezing it gently. “You’re driving me insane. I’m trying to be gentle with you.”

He pops off, giving me a mischievous grin I’ve never seen before. The way the firelight dances off his face, highlighting his puffy lips and wet eyes, is so beautiful.

“Who said I wanted you to be gentle? I told you to ruin me, demon. Don’t you want to please your summoner?”

“Little witch, you asked for it,” I growl as I grab his hips and pull him into my lap.

I line myself up, catching myself on his rim. He presses himself down, taking me slowly. His ass sucks me up greedily with little resistance. I press down on his hips, and when my knot bumps against his ass, I unleash the beast I’ve kept under control

for his sake. I dig my heels into the bed, bouncing him up and down with one hand steadily holding his hip and the other on his shoulder. He moans like a cockslut, taking every thrust and babbling for more.

My summoner is insatiable. Greedy. Just as hooked on me as I am on him. I pull him closer to me, catching his lips in a succulent kiss, then biting his bottom lip. His blood is warm and spicy, like cinnamon and clove. I lick the last couple of droplets as I thrust up into him, hitting that sensitive spot inside him. His eyes roll back into his head and I use the opportunity to work my way inside his mind again.

You look beautiful slamming down on my cock, little witch. Taking me inside you, I mentally link him. How do you feel?

So. Fucking. Good, he thinks as he takes deep, heaving breaths.

I can feel myself getting closer to my own release, so I push his hips down harder, until my knot is battering his rim. When he comes all over my stomach and chest, I push down as hard as I can, wedging my way inside him. My knot swells, joining us together and trapping my cum inside him. The knowledge that I'm claiming him from the inside out—painting his most intimate place with my seed—makes me fucking feral. I dig my teeth into his shoulder, clamping down on his skin and magically willing the wound to leave a scar.

It shall be a permanent mark, so everyone knows who Ambrose Stone belongs to.

He runs his fingers through my hair and makes a groaning, keening sound that has my cock pulsing inside him.

Recalling my shadows, I let his eyes readjust to the light. Leaving his mind is hard—I'd stay forever if he'd let me—but I sever the connection between us. I release his shoulder and pull him into me, littering his face and neck with kisses. I

kiss each bite mark from earlier, licking over them like a crazed, possessive bastard.

“Ciarán?” he murmurs.

The high I ride crashes when I hear the exhaustion in his voice. Was I too rough with him?

“Yes, summoner?” I reply, searching his face for any sign of unhappiness or unwanted pain.

“That was.... amazing .” He buries his face into my shoulder, wrapping his arms around my neck as he breathes heavily.

“You’re mine, summoner. I’ll treat you like the prince you are for eternity.” And I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure he’s mine until the end of days.

“I belong to you, only you,” he says around a yawn.

“Forever.” No matter what...

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I feel something slither over my skin and open my eyes, reluctantly leaving the blissful world between wakefulness and sleep. A dull twinge of pain flashes through my ass, making me smile as I remember what happened last night.

Ciarán fucked me into a deep, dreamless sleep. It was the best sex I've ever had. He made me feel so cherished. His dirty talk made me feel as if I were on fire... He said the filthiest things.

You're such a greedy little whore. Just wait until my cock splits you open.

Replaying his words in my mind makes my morning wood twitch. I want to bend over and let him fuck me all day, ride him until I fall apart, pain be damned. Rolling over, I find Ciarán lying next to me. He's still here.

His shadows roll over my arms and legs, wrapping me in a black cocoon of comfort and protection. His arm rests heavily over my side, and his hand grips my ass cheek hard enough to leave marks behind.

"Awake so soon?" he grumbles.

I look at the clock on my bedside table. It's 4 in the morning, pitch black outside.

"I'm such a greedy little whore for you, I can't resist you," I say, using his own words.

He searches my face, as if he's trying to find out my intentions. I have a wry sense of humor, and my words are often left open to interpretation because of it.

“I’m not mad about what you said... I liked it,” I confess. Because it’s true. Last night opened my eyes to what intimacy should be like. To what devotion feels like.

He takes my face in his hand, then licks into my mouth. He kisses me long and hard, and it seems as if the whole world is still. His kiss works through me, setting me ablaze with desire. He rolls over, pinning me beneath him.

He grinds into me, slotting our hard cocks together. “You really are an insatiable little slut, aren’t you?”

“Only for you,” I mewl as he reaches down and holds my cock in his hand. He teases me with firm, lazy strokes.

He strokes me faster, then shuffles down the bed, nuzzling into my groin before taking my whole cock in one gulp. He takes me deep down his throat, practically sucking my soul from my body. I thrust into his mouth, but he holds my hips down as a wet finger slips between my cheeks, rubbing over my hole.

“Oh fuck,” I moan. “Slip it in. Fuck me with your big, thick fingers.”

My ass swallows it up, and the little twinge of pain feels so fucking good. I love feeling thoroughly used.

As he slides it in and out of me, I smell a faint wisp of smoke. I turn my head to the fireplace and realize it’s not lit.

“Ciarán—” I say as he sits up and breathes in deeply. The smell intensifies, turning intense and acridly smoky. The room heats up, as if by magic...

“The house is on fire!” he growls, springing up from the bed. “This is magical—I can smell him.”

Ciarán's shadows wrap around him like a robe and he picks me up, flinging me over his shoulder as if I were weightless. We run out of the back door and walk around to the front of the house.

"The entire entryway and part of the living room is on fire, and the flames are rapidly spreading to the back of your cottage," he states.

He places me on the ground and scans the woods around my home. We both know Caulder is behind this; only magical fire can spread that fast. Ciarán stands as still as a statue as he stares into the distance. Caulder stands in a copse of trees, his magic crackling between his hands. He forms a ball of flames and launches it in our direction. Ciarán freezes it in its path, then morphs into his demon form—a truly terrifying visage for anyone unlucky enough to threaten me.

His pale skin glitters under the rising sun. The features of his face harden, his eyes turning a glowing white. His horns sprout through his dark hair, curling back from his head like a crown. The tail that brought me so much pleasure last night flicks to attention behind him, like a weapon he wields in battle. He launches the fireball back in Caulder's direction, who barely dodges it in time.

"Your days are numbered, Caulder Scarborough," Ciarán bellows in his preternatural tone. His voice is an ominous warning. "You'll pay for your transgressions with blood and agony."

Caulder's eyes widen, and his eyebrows almost meet his hairline. The fear evident on his face is like a balm to my broken pride. The man who made my life a living hell—who scared me into fearing for my life—is now scared for his. Today will be the beginning of his suffering. Ciarán slowly stalks him, keeping my ex in his line of sight in case he tries to attack again. Caulder turns and runs into the woods, like the fucking coward he is.

I hear a crackling pop. The glass from the windows blows out and a beam falls

through the roof. The house I grew up in is burning to the ground. The place that holds all of my memories of my parents. Where I can still feel close to them, even though they're gone.

My tears fall, and I don't even try to stop them. How could Caulder do this to me? My home is all I have. All I had...

Ciarán comes to my side and holds my hand. I can feel his magic pulsing through me, and it calms me.

"Take my magic. Merge it with your elemental magic to stop the fire."

"I don't think I can. My magic is shit," I admit. It's better he finds out what he got himself into now. He swore to protect me and should know how useless my magic is.

He forces his way past my magical barriers, filling me with a power I've never felt before. His magic has a static energy. It buzzes inside me, expanding until it feels as if it's pressing against my insides, searching for a way to escape.

"Your magic isn't shit, Ambrose. You just need to have confidence in yourself. I know you can do it. Feel my magic growing inside you? That's you—not me. I just lent you a boost."

I look down at our joined hands, only to find that they aren't joined anymore. His magic isn't deflating. If anything, it grows more intense, like I'll explode if I don't use it. Pointing my open palms toward the fire, I imagine a rushing waterfall. The image morphs into a deluge of water hitting the house from above.

When I open my eyes, torrents of water are pouring down from the sky onto my house. They extinguish the fire slowly but surely, until all that's left is a smoking pile of ash and rubbish. I pick through the remains, hoping to find anything that survived. Ciarán stands behind me. My sentinel watching over me. Protecting me.

The only thing that survived is my grandmother's grimoire. Layer upon layer of Stone witch spells must have created a protectant seal on it. It lies unscathed where the coffee table was. I hold it close because it's the only thing I have left from my family.

I don't realize I'm sobbing until my demon turns me around, coddling me into his chest.

"Shhh, it's okay," he coos. "All is not lost..."

"Wh-what do you mean?" I stutter. "I literally just lost everything I own. All because of that asshole."

"If our combined magic was enough to put the fire out... maybe it will be enough to fix the house. If your elemental magic allows you to create water, air, earth, and fire, isn't it reasonable to assume we can undo the impact of those elements?"

I stare at him with my mouth wide open in disbelief. I think Ciarán gives me much more credit than I'm due. My magic is chaotic, downright unreliable. Last week, I meant to cast a simple spell to boil water for a cup of tea, and somehow sent shards of ceramic mug flying through the air. One time I accidentally created a blizzard when I was a teenager because I wanted a snow day from school. Another time I almost hurt Caulder during one of our lessons when I tried to conjure fire.

How can I possibly rise to the challenge of undoing the damage from a magically set house fire?

"I may have gotten lucky this time. Even with your boost, I won't be able to do it..." I can barely look at him as I say the words. The truth is too embarrassing.

"Yes, you can, summoner. You didn't say those words—your insecurities did. After years of being put down and discounted, you don't believe in yourself anymore. I

believe in you. You can do this.”

Ciarán’s words hit deep inside of me. If he believes in me, then maybe it’s worth giving this a shot. I nod, then take his hand and lead him to the center of the house. Something about this location seems... right. The vibe here is more potent. I close my eyes and envision the way my house used to look when I was growing up, before my parents passed away.

Mom’s beautiful rose bushes in front of the house. The pergola we set up in the backyard and the flowers that bloomed on its vines. The brass sun knocker I found at an antique sale. Dad and I fixed it to the bright blue door. Countless evenings spent reading near the big bookshelf in the living room. The smell of homemade cinnamon buns in the kitchen, and the ravenous excitement I had whenever I’d eat them.

With every memory, Ciarán’s magic grows and swells inside me, thrumming to a sound in the distance I can’t quite distinguish. I keep thinking about memories from my childhood and teens. The good times we all had together before they died.

Suddenly, my mind takes a turn, remembering the night they passed away.

Coven members gathered in a spell circle around a young, bleeding witch. The bright red blood on her neck and shirt. The deep gashes her assailant left behind. She suffered from a werewolf bite, but the transformation didn’t work. Her excruciatingly painful cries. The risk they all took to save her. The look of determination on Caulder’s face as a whirling, bright light erupted from their joined hands...

I thought that light would save the young woman, but it struck my parents dead.

The magic inside me fades away, dwindling to nothing. Unwelcome memories of Caulder flood my brain.

“You’re not trying hard enough, Ambrose. What kind of witch can’t even conjure

water in a bowl, and an elemental witch at that. This is fucking pathetic.”

“Valentine’s Day isn’t that big of a deal. You’re just trying to pick a fight with me.”

“It’s none of your business why I don’t want to tell anyone. We keep our relationship private and if you don’t like it, I can leave.”

“Stop fucking crying, it’s just a scratch. If you didn’t annoy the fuck out of me, I wouldn’t have hit you.”

His words swirl around my head, killing the little confidence I had in myself. All my hopes of resurrecting my house deflate. Caulder is right. I’m pathetic, a shit excuse for a witch. No wonder he didn’t want to be with me. I can’t even protect myself.

I feel Ciarán push his way into my mind.

Ambrose... my demon’s voice rings in my mind. Are you okay? What happened?

Nothing happened—I’m just a failure. Something inside of me is broken. Why does he think I’m even worth protecting? I’m useless, nothing. The only people who cared about me are gone.

Self loathing takes over as my intrusive thoughts start to spiral.

Ambrose... snap out of it. Stop it, none of that is true.

I open my eyes and see my demon transform into a surging mass of shadows. He charges me, going down my throat and spreading through my body. This possession feels different. The last time was sexual in nature, but this time it feels as if he’s filling in my emptiness. Patching over all the hollow spaces and making me whole again.

Ambrose Stone, we're in this together. You are not broken. You are not a failure. You can do great, impossible things with your magic, he declares. See what I see...

A reel plays through my mind. It's Ciarán watching me as I conjure the water and put the fire out. He momentarily watches the magic I create, but most of his focus is on me. On the expression of accomplishment and pride on my face—on my beaming smile.

I hadn't even realized how happy using magic made me. How capable I felt when carrying out a spell correctly. Seeing myself through his eyes gives me the confidence I lost.

I close my eyes again, but instead of relying on happy memories to fuel me, I look inward. I dig deep, finding that happiness from before and harnessing it as power. A surge of our combined magic bursts from my hands, and when I open my eyes, my house reconstructs in real time. It's as if I'm watching everything happen in reverse. The charred remains are transfigured to their original materials, and the pieces float back in place. Within a few minutes, my home is back to the way it was before the fire.

Ciarán, you need to see this, I internally scream.

He leaves me, returning to his corporal form. His smile says a thousand words.

"You're amazing, my little witch." His voice gushes with pride as he brings me in for a hug.

A throat clearing breaks us apart. I turn my head and see Caulder. He's flanked by my coven's elders. All of them regard Ciarán with suspicion, as if he's a dangerous weapon or a freak of nature. My demon projects a shield around us, one that no magic can penetrate. I know that with him, I can confront Caulder and expose him for the liar he is.

“We saw that demon possess you, Ambrose,” Caulder says in a deceptively concerning tone, as if he didn’t set my house on fire and attack us. “How long has this been going on?”

“Don’t you fucking dare try to play the hero, you lying bastard! You set my house on fire and attacked us.” I’m seething with anger, and it takes every iota of control I have not to strike him down where he stands.

“What are you talking about? I know things have been hard for you since your parents passed and you haven’t been yourself, so I came to check on you on my early morning walk. Your home was burning to the ground, and this demon attacked me when I tried to help you.”

The elders fucking fawn over him, giving him googly eyes and patting him on the shoulder like he’s some stand-up guy. It makes me sick.

“You’re lying,” Ciarán says, a smirk blooming across his face. “This man has abused and mistreated my summoner, and I have proof.”

“How did you summon a shadow demon?” Mrs. Talbot, the newest of the elders, says with a hint of surprise.

“I used my family’s grimoire, just like any other witch would,” I snap.

“I’ll take that book so I can research how to properly banish this demon. He’s not safe. He’ll infect and corrupt your mind, Ambrose,” Caulder says as he reaches for the book.

I blast him with my magic before he can even touch the shield, knocking him flat on his ass. He’s unconscious, and the youngest elder checks to see if he’s okay. “Ciarán is right. He can prove that Caulder Scarborough isn’t the man you think he is.”

The other elders look at each other, as if to silently confer. Their facial expressions are a mix of disbelief, shock, and interest.

“How do we know your demon isn’t making this up? What if he possesses us?” Mr. Lambert asks, eyeing my demon as if he’ll attack him at any minute.

“The demon is bonded to me, and can only possess me because I allow him to do so. I can vouch for his integrity. He won’t harm you.”

Ciarán nods, then takes my hand. “Ambrose is right, I can only possess him. I am bound to him and will protect him with my life. I also can’t make up memories—only show them as they were shown to me. Join hands with us, and you’ll see the truth.”

They reluctantly join hands with us. My demon immediately replays every single memory I’ve ever shown him. It’s a giant reel of Caulder abusing and brow-beating me. He shows them snippets of the tamer intimate acts and conversations we’ve shared, and the entirety of the fight we had before I summoned him.

Their gasps while everything transpires are all the confirmation I needed. They see the truth. They know who he is.

When Ciarán is done, we break our union. The elders seem shell shocked.

“He hit you...” Mrs. Talbot murmured. “You poor boy.”

“He had a relationship with you the entire time he was courting Flora,” Mr. Bale, her uncle, gasps.

“He kept me a dirty secret, like I was something shameful.” Saying it aloud makes me feel better, as if I’m letting go of the trauma.

“Because you are shameful,” Caulder says as he rises from the ground. He pats the

dust from his pants, a malicious look on his face. “You’re a pathetic excuse for a witch, and once I realized I couldn’t train you, sex was the only thing you were good for.”

“Why would you do that to him, right after his parents died?” Mr. Lambert asks. “You targeted him at his weakest and made him think you loved him, all while courting Miss Flora. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” he says around a laugh. “Ambrose broke Witch Law by summoning a demon. That’s punishable by death.”

“He only did it to protect himself from you. You hurt him, then tried to blame him for it. You tried to burn his house down with him in it. If we weren’t awake, he would have died. I’ll never let your coven take him away from me,” Ciarán growls. My demon uses his magic to strengthen his shield, turning it a bright, shimmering shade of gray that matches his eyes.

“You tried to murder Ambrose...” the young elder says to Caulder as she backs away from him.

“I think he killed Ambrose’s parents. He was there when they died, and could have been responsible for the spell going wrong. I saw the expression on his face in Ambrose’s memory and it’s worth investigating.”

“High Priest Smythe already investigated it and said their deaths were an accident,” Caulder shouts.

“And who helped him with his investigation?” I ask. Then it dawns on me—“It’s odd that he passed away a little more than a month after my parents. Another death from mysterious circumstances...”

The Elders break into frenzied conversations. Ciarán peers down at me, giving me a

wink. Caulder's entire web of lies is crashing down around him, and having a front row seat to his destruction is the best view.

My demon unfurls his shadows, wrapping them around Caulder's throat and hands, binding him into submission. He forces him to kneel on the ground.

"Silence!" he bellows. "Explain yourself, High Priest. Tell the truth, or I'll end your life."

"Someone had to do what was necessary to save this coven! It was crumbling under Smythe's leadership—he never cared about it the way I do! I had to kill the Stones. Aspen was the next in line for High Priest, and Ellie would have never stopped searching for his killer. So I channeled all of those witch's magic, took them out in one fell swoop, and made it look like an accident. Then I killed Smythe, so no one would suspect his murder was a power grab. Don't you see? It was all for the greater good!"

"And why did you set your sights on my little witch?" Ciarán growls. "He wasn't a threat to you."

"Because his parents were the most powerful witches in our coven. I assumed that magical prowess had to be somewhere inside him, but he proved me wrong. The fact that he was desperate enough to fall in love with me was a bonus. I tried to use his family's grimoire, but it wouldn't open for me while he was alive. Once he threatened to out our affair to Flora, I knew he had to go."

"Your confession is enough to condemn you," my demon rasps as his shadows tighten around Caulder's neck and infiltrate his mouth, choking him quickly and efficiently. His death is short and sweet.

"You murdered him before he could stand trial!" Mrs. Talbot shrieks.

“My judgment is trial enough. My job is to protect my summoner from everything and everyone that tries to harm him.” Ciarán scans the elders, his face stone cold and void of any expression. It sends chills down my spine. “Do any of you want to harm my summoner and meet the same fate?”

“You don’t understand,” Mr. Bale pleads. “Ambrose is a danger to himself and others. His poor judgment led him to summon a dangerous demon. Even though his intention was to protect himself, he unleashed you onto our coven. He needs to face the consequences of his actions.”

Ciarán’s shadows ripple, striking Mr. Bale in a flash and wrapping around his entire body. The other elders scream. Some cower in fear, and Mrs. Talbot runs into the woods.

“ You don’t understand. I will protect what’s mine at all costs. If you move against us, you will meet your end.” His shadows constrict around Mr. Bale, choking him and turning his face a blotchy shade of red.

“Ciarán and I are going to disappear. Don’t look for us. If you do, we’ll come back and decimate the entire coven.”

“Would you do that to your kin?” Mr. Lambert asks.

“You all laughed at me and treated me like an outsider. Instead of offering to help me with my magic, you laughed at me. You excluded me. You’re no kin of mine. Leave my property and never darken my life again.”

I use my anger to conjure a strong gust of wind that knocks them all into the woods and off my property.

“Are you ready to start your new life?” Ciarán wraps his arm around me, pulling me into his side.

“Only if you come with me. How about somewhere sunny?”

“Little witch, I’ll follow you wherever you go. I’ll always protect you. Because you’re mine .”

Thank you for reading!