



The Nephilim's Touch (Tales from the Tarot)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Hex, Indiana is the one place Gabe has found acceptance as a nephilim. He keeps his head down and enjoys his work at the one bar in town while making sure stray feathers don't find their way into the wrong hands. Tending his beloved plants helps him stay busy, but he longs for someone to care for.

Van knew better than to go after the king of crossroads. Their battle ripped a hole in the veil and sent Van to a strange town in the human world to bleed out when his healing magic failed. Just as he thinks it's lights out, the most beautiful angelic creature approaches him. Demons, especially crossroads demons, aren't supposed to get attached. But his rescuer has the softest touch and the sweetest voice. Perhaps Van can take a little break from trying to become king of the crossroads demons.

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GABE

Who starts a bar fight with a gargoyle?

I've been in Hex, Indiana for all of six months, and there are a few things I've noticed.

People here are strange.

Would I start a bar fight with a drunk gargoyle or a demon drowning his sorrows in flaming HellFire? No, nope, nada. I'd get my ass right out of dodge. But Hex has a certain appeal to it that I've fallen in love with. That and, well, I'm the bartender at Flutter and Fangs and I can't just bounce when there's a conflict. I mean, I probably could, but my boss would probably be upset with me.

I wiggle a bottle of vodka in front of the pair. "If you both settle down, I'll pour you each a round of free drinks, but you gotta chill."

"Domhnall's starting shit again," Warwick, a crossroads demon, snarls. His blue tail whips back and forth with his agitation as he bares his teeth at the gargoyle who rolls his eyes.

Domhnall growls back. "That's because you're always in here sniveling about your lost love. No one cares anymore. Grow the fuck up and move on."

Wick lunges at Domhnall, and I reach across the bar top to grab him by the collar. Thank goodness neither have wings at the moment.

Honestly, I don't mind Wick talking about Ethan. I have faith the two will be reunited some day and I hope I can bear witness to it. It's obvious Wick loves this man with his whole heart and I dream of having someone love me just as deeply one day. I sigh at the thought. It's too lovely and I'm not worthy of the dream.

Once Warwick settles down, I release him. "Wick, how about you go hang out with Frankie for a little while?" I tip my head towards the Hellhound.

Frankie sits in a soft dog bed across the room. She's chewing on a toy, not paying attention to anyone. She looks like a giant Doberman, and honestly, I was terrified of her at first, but she has to be the sweetest Hellhound that has ever existed. Not that I've met many. Okay, only just Frankie. Blue flames lick at her tail and ears. I'd go play with her myself if I wasn't busy.

Reluctantly, Wick drags his feet towards her. His tail slides across the floor like some sad creature being pulled along. When he sits on one of the plush leather couches, he pats his lap. Frankie's ears twitch and she hops up with a happy little bark. Precious!

"Good riddance," Domhnall says under his breath as he leans in toward me. "Wick acts like he's a child sometimes. Ethan's been gone for years. He needs to move on."

I shrug as I wipe down the counter. "I don't think he does."

Domhnall snorts. "That's because you're a romantic, too."

I tap my nose. "True. Very true. But hasn't Wick's brother been on the run for a while? So there's this double whammy of missing people and feeling rejected. So you antagonizing him doesn't help." I throw my dishtowel over my shoulder and give

Domhnall a mostly fake glare. He's handsome with gray eyes and big muscles. I know he has wings, but I've never seen them.

Most people in Hex are ridiculously attractive. I haven't met anyone I wouldn't crawl into bed with if they asked me. But no one really knows me.

"Ah, forgot about his brother." Domhnall lifts his drink to his lips. "Maybe I should apologize," he mumbles while placing his money on the counter.

"That's what I like to hear." I smack the counter and turn to wipe up a bit of spilled juice from earlier.

The barstool groans as he stands. Thank goodness everything here can withstand the weight of a gargoyle.

I've only heard stories of Warwick's older brother, Van. He seems like a hoot and total opposite of Wick, but I also want to throat punch him for putting his brother through so much.

Van is best friends with my boss Pike and even Pike hasn't heard from him in over a year. I can't imagine what Warwick is going through. Okay, I can, but in a different way.

You see, I'm a nephilim. Mom's an angel, dad was a human, and I'm, well, me. I can't even say I'm a part of both worlds because I've never been to the angel realm, hardly know my mother, and have zero idea what it means to be part angel.

I've only met my mother twice in my entire life. Once when I sprouted wings at sixteen—that was fun—and again about six months ago after dad died and I needed a place to go and mourn without worrying whether I can contain my magic. Mom told me about Hex, Indiana, and I plan to spend my life here. Everyone is so damn

welcoming. I don't think I ever want to venture back out into the so-called normal parts of the human realm.

Flutter and Fangs used to be a strip joint, but now it's just a bar with entertainment that's not always pole dancing. Tonight we have karaoke and it seems to be the favored event of everyone in Hex.

Apparently, around the same time Van disappeared, the leading coven considered disbanding Hex. Thankfully, they didn't, and I get to live my best life. It's only taken my entire twenty-eight years to get here. Not that dad did a bad job raising me or anything. Humans are just... cruel. Not dad though. Dad was... well, dad. He did the best he could.

"Hey, Gabe," Pike waves his hand in front of my face. My boss is a former crossroads demon. His partner, Lark, destroyed his crossroads and broke the curse, now Pike's an incubus.

"Sorry, kinda spaced out there. Just thinking."

"What about?" Lark, he's Fae, hops up on the bar, his wings flutter as he gets comfortable. His long pink hair is braided back today.

I turn and give them both a bright smile. "Just grateful to be here. Hex is great, and so is this place."

"Glad you're happy." Pike looks around and cringes as he picks up an empty bottle of HellFire. "Did Wick really go through three bottles today?"

"Yeah, I cut him off and sent him to sit with Frankie, though." I wave toward the pair, keeping to myself that Wick tried to start a fight with a gargoyle... again. Poor Warwick stares at the ceiling with his hands in Frankie's short fur.

“I worry about him,” Lark nibbles his bottom lip as he looks up at Pike.

“So do I.” Pike scratches his jaw. “He’s getting worse. It’s concerning he keeps drinking HellFire when the effects don’t work on him anymore.”

I nod with a sigh. I keep trying to befriend Warwick, but he keeps brushing me off. HellFire is the only thing that gets demons drunk. Now he drinks it because it lets him go slightly numb.

I rub at my chest because my heart aches for the demon. He’s not much younger than me and he lost his one true love to magic years ago. Some say—okay A LOT say—he needs to move on, but I say they don’t understand how demons work.

In the time I’ve been in Hex, Indiana, I’ve discovered a lot about demons, witches, vampires, and shifters that I never knew before living here. Demons get attached. Like... attached attached. And what people forget is that Wick and Ethan they go way back. Way way back. It’s hard to just forget your first love.

Lark’s shoulders slump. Pike swipes his face and his tail shimmies before wrapping around his waist.

“I appreciate what Van did for us.” Pike holds his hand out for Lark and squeezes. “But I don’t think he realized how much him needing to disappear for a while would affect Wick.”

I nod again and my stomach rumbles like a damn lion possessing me. The two look at me wide eyed and I shrug. “Missed lunch before coming in.”

Pike chuckles and drops a hand on my shoulder. “We’re slow right now and things’ll pick up later. How about you go take your break?”

My stomach growls again, answering for me. “I do wanna go back to that magic shop. I got a bunch of fun add-ins for cocktails last time.”

“Magic shop?” Lark tips his head and turns to Pike. “We have a magic shop?”

“First I’m hearing about it,” Pike says.

“What?!” I say. “It’s this neat little shop a couple blocks down. It’s by the library, between the groomer and the nail salon.”

They both shake their heads. Now that I’m thinking about it...

“Okay, I have noticed it does kind of come and go. Figured it was the coven’s doing. The Owner is always nice. And he always has some new plant!” I bounce on my toes just thinking of the latest one I got from him a few weeks ago. He called it a magic orchid and I have to use special water. It sparkles like stars at night and I use it as a nightlight in the hall of my apartment.

“Of course you’re excited about the plants,” Pike chuckles as he tugs Lark from the counter and into his arms.

“Have I shown you all my plant babies?” I pull my phone from my pocket and they both step back.

“Yes,” Lark laughs. “And you’ve named them all. They’re beautiful, but...” He backs away with Pike. “We’ll pass. Go take your break. We’ll hold things down until Ava gets here.”

“Fair enough.” I give them a grin as I untie the black half apron around my waist and fold it onto the counter.

I swipe my black hair out of my face. It's down to my shoulders now and I constantly ask Lark for his hair routine, but he always tells me it's Fae genetics. As soon as I open the door, the humidity soaks into my hair and makes it frizz. One hundred percent not a fan. I brush it back some more and curse myself for forgetting hair ties yet again . Whatever, I'll grab some before I head back to work.

My favorite pastel green Chuck Taylor High Tops (they have a cute little bow on the ankle!) crunch over the loose gravel that found its way to the sidewalk. Wind whips in the trees, sending green leaves and my damn hair everywhere. It's the tail end of summer, and not gonna lie, Southern Indiana summers aren't where it's at. It's so hot and humid, it's like breathing soup. I like soup, but not air soup.

Despite the summer air soup, I love that in Hex, I can just be. If I want to let my wings out, I can and no one will look at me twice. But... again. It's hot and I don't like being hot and my wings make me hot. So packed away they stay. I wiggle my shoulder blades because now my back itches where my wings would be if I let them out to play.

Luckily, The Magic Shop isn't too far away and my walk is pleasant even if my allergies come out in full force. My nose drips and I blink a few times to get the grit from my eyes. Ugh, I'll get back to work red eyed and that's not the best look, but at least Pike and Lark know I don't do drugs, well not anymore. And it was only pot. Like five times.

Barely anyone drives in Hex. Most people either walk, fly, or teleport. The air is sweeter than anyplace else I've ever lived, which is quite a few places. Navy brat retired from duty at your service. I stop and salute the tree to my right before continuing my walk.

Chimes twinkle in the breeze, and I hum as I go. There's always something fun to discover in Hex. Always. Even the squirrels seem magical.

The familiar red script of The Magic Shop's sign comes into view and I speed up. The shop's in a tiny strip mall between a nail salon for "those girlyies and ghoulies with talons and claws" as the sign says, and a pet groomer for "those Hellhounds that need a trim." I can't believe how out and open every shop is about catering to the supernatural. It's nothing like, well, the rest of the world.

I'm out of breath once I get to the door of the shop and take a few minutes to center myself before going full Kool-Aid Man inside. I wonder what kind of plants will be here today. As I enter, I breathe in the familiar scent of old books and incense.

"Hello, Gabe," The Owner says. He's tall and his usual top hat perches on his head. No one wears top hats anymore. I think he's the only person I've seen in real life wear one, but it goes with the suit he usually wears.

Before I can offer my own greeting, I get distracted and suck in another breath as I power walk to an end cap.

Oh, lovely sweet new baby mine.

"What is this?" I gently fluff the bushy leaves and sniff the huge pink flower. "You're a beauty."

There's a cough behind me, and I turn back to The Owner. He tips his head toward the plant. "Sorry, that one's already sold."

My shoulders drop and I keep fluffing the leaves. "Oh."

"Don't worry, I'll get more special plants in. Now, what else can I help you with?" The Owner flashes me a smile. He's handsome, but I've always been too shy to ask him out or anything, which is so unlike me. I usually just blurt out my request, then want to crawl out of my skin from embarrassment. He's probably busy all the time.

Who knows how many realms he hops? “Gabe?”

“Sorry, sorry. I keep getting distracted today. It’s turning into a real problem. Can I get about twenty of those cocktail add-ins you gave me last time?”

He nods and turns to rummage in a drawer to his right. “Anything in particular?”

“Stamina seems to be the most popular.” I run my finger over the countertop. “Good luck. Maybe courage.” I lick my lips and look up in time to see him give me a sly smile before he ducks his head again. “That should be good for the weekend.”

He pulls tiny glass bottle after tiny glass bottle out of the drawer and sets them on the counter. I love them. They’re about one milliliter each, which doesn’t seem like a lot, but just a few drops in a drink is all it takes.

“Next time you run a batch, could you make a few that are bigger?” I pinch one bottle between my thumb and forefinger, taking in the cuteness of the bottle.

“Sure thing.” He starts wrapping them in tissue and I wander the shop.

“Do you have anything on nephilims? Or the angel realm? Or?—”

There’s heat on my back. His long arm reaches over me. “I think you’ll find this one to your liking.” He hands the giant leather-bound tome over before disappearing again. I almost drop the book, but catch it just in time.

I have no idea how he moves so fast, but it’s always like that. The soft clanging of the tiny glass bottles tells me he’s back to wrapping the delicate pieces. I lug the book to the nearest chair that sucks me into its comfort. The leather is so smooth under my fingers when I rub the cover of the book.

“What language is this?” I ask. Nothing makes sense to me.

“Just open it. It’s spelled that only the right person can read it.”

“What if I can’t?”

“Better to try now than discover later you can’t.”

“Very true,” I mumble to myself. I take a deep breath and hope I’m worthy.

A card flies out of the pages as I flip open the book. It looks like a playing card, but the more I squint, it’s not like any playing card I’ve seen before. I settle the book on the table next to me and pick up the card, curiosity getting the better of me.

The Consort. I flip it over to read The Empress. I scrunch my face as I look over the images. They’re identical, except The Consort looks like the masculine version of the figure on The Empress’s side. They both sit upon thrones, carry a scepter, have a pretty crown, and so many plants. Honestly, The Consort looks a little like me with black shoulder length hair and a thin build. But that’s just a coincidence, right? I look around before shoving the card back into the book. Maybe it’s a bookmark?

I flip the book open again and wait with bated breath. The title page is empty. I flip a few more pages and nothing. My shoulders drop and I let out the breath. Nothing. Of course. I just stare at the blank page, waiting for something to happen. Determined for something to happen, I talk to the book. Not loud enough The Owner can hear me, at least I hope it’s not that loud. When the pages remain blank, I drop my head back and resign myself to the rejection. It’s nothing new, but hurts different coming from a book.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as one of my black feathers floats into the open pages. I snatch it up as fast as possible and look around, hoping I’m still all alone. No

one can have one of these, they're too dangerous in the wrong hands.

Just as I stuff the feather into my pocket, the page in front of me glows. A dot of gold appears on the top right corner and dances across the page, leaving a trail that reads: So, You're A Nephilim. What Do You Want To Know?

I laugh as the huge leather book shrinks to a size I can fit in a bag. "I think it likes me!" I snap it shut and run up to the counter to show The Owner. "Look?—"

He raises a hand. "It's not for my eyes to see."

I give him another of my charming grins. "Alright then. I think I'm ready."

The Owner rings me up, and I take in the entire place again. The narrow aisles give me anxiety. And I have no idea how the place is taller than the building itself, but the shelves go high and there are those library ladders, just like in Disney's Beauty and the Beast that I'm always tempted to play on. I'm always sad the snack counter never seems to be open. The shop is a little different every time I come in, which of course is the nature of any shop. Getting in new products, selling out on others. The scent never seems to change, though, and it always brings me comfort.

"That's it for today," he says as I hand over my card. "You know, I'd take one of those feathers if you're ever interested."

I stagger back as I shake my head. "Nothing good ever happens when my feathers go awry. Not that I don't trust you. I just?—"

He holds up a hand. "It's okay. Read the book. I look forward to seeing you again." He hands me my purchase and I give a small wave as I leave.

I swear my heart pounds out of my chest. My feathers in the wrong hands lead to

catastrophe. My shoulders shutter. Every time one of my feathers sheds, something huge always happens. It's like I walk through a portal when I exit the shop. My head's on a swivel as I take in my surroundings. Hopefully, this time, it's just a fluke. Hopefully, this time, the feather doesn't mean anything.

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VAN

What no one tells you about being on the run from another demon, namely the king of crossroads demons, is that you have two options. Go home to the demon realm and face the music, or go to the Hell realm and hide.

I chose option number two.

Do I get out of my crossroads duties? No, damnit, and it's inconvenient whenever someone summons me, but I can take a few precautions when I'm back in the human realm. Wearing a medallion of dragon scale charmed by a Hellwitch to hide me from the king is my best option. Unfortunately, the cost of said medallion is being the Hellwitch's fighter in the weekly fights. It's a lot like those street fights in the human realm where people take bets, but ten times worse. And ten times more fun. At least I think it's fun. So far I haven't lost a fight yet.

The stench of sulfur and roses blends in the air. I'm bouncing on my toes as I spit out a mouthful of blood while I wait for my next opponent. The last guy was a seven-foot beast that looked a lot like Chernabog, that demon in Disney's Fantasia, just wanting to have a party. You've seen the meme where he just wants to have a jam sesh and he's the DJ, right? But I took him out. Me! Little ol' crossroads demon Van. I pound my chest as I wait.

"Whose next?!" I yell as the demons stare down at me, snickering like they know something I don't. I've been here for a year, making myself at home and keeping Poe,

the king of crossroads demons, off my back.

Just a hint of regret tries to fly through and infiltrate my thoughts. I had to leave my brother knowing he's been in a low place for years. But do I have regrets killing a mad man and keeping my friends and family safe? Absolutely not. Drake fell down a hole of obsession that needed to be taken care of.

Drake was evil, obsessed with Lark, who he stole from the Fae realm. For what? Longevity and stronger magic? There are much easier ways to get both. I took the witch to the coven and since by then he'd been turned into a vampire, they said he was no longer their problem. I could have taken him to the vampires, but instead I chose the dramatic route like always. I ripped his head off and threw it at the coven leaders. And for that, I had to run.

Crossroads demons are only allowed to kill during their deals. I still don't get what the big problem is. Why does it matter if I kill someone that obviously needs to be killed outside of a bargain? It makes the world and the collective realms safer to just get rid of the bad guys, right?

"Are you all cowards? Who will fight me?!" I beat my chest again. My tail whips into a frenzy behind me and my wings fan out, making me bigger.

"I'll fight you," an all too familiar voice says behind me. I whip around to find Poe standing with his arms crossed over his broad chest. His tail is calm and poised, wings tucked in. It's as if he knows I'll fail against him.

I snarl as I charge. My razor-sharp claws scrap for flesh and miss when he teleports out of the way.

"You always had a temper problem, Van," Poe taunts from somewhere above me.

“That’s because you don’t know how to be the leader!”

Poe scoffs as he pushes me away as easily as if I were a child. “In the three hundred years I’ve been the king, you are the only one that’s fought me so damn hard. Everyone else falls in line with the rules. But you?—”

“The rules don’t make sense,” I yell as I throw a punch to his gut, but he doesn’t even react.

“They make perfect sense. If you had paid attention to more than the magic class, you’d understand.” Poe’s punch lands on my diaphragm and I drop to my knees, heaving. “Stay down.”

“Never.” I spit and bounce back to my feet, ready to take him out finally. “If I win, I’m king.”

“When you lose, there’s a huge lesson you’re going to hate learning, but it’s for your own good.”

“Stop underestimating me!” I want to slap the smile from Poe’s stupid face.

“You’re entirely too volatile, Van. When you learn that not everything requires violence, you’ll be a worthy opponent in the King Fight, but until then...” Poe punches me in the face, sending my head back.

I stumble and trip all over my own feet. “What the?—”

Poe’s hands are on my shoulders. “Face it, you’re not ready. You’re too young.” He holds a hand out to someone who passes him something. “You have a month. Thirty-one days, seven hundred and forty-four hours to learn how to nurture rather than go off and be angry about everything. Learn to calm your temper, Van.”

I can't focus. "I'm a demon . What's wrong with?—"

Poe presses something into the center of my chest. "This will count down. If you're still a selfish, arrogant prick by the time it reaches zero, you'll turn to ash. But as soon as you truly learn your lesson, this will fall off and disintegrate. May your stubborn ass figure it out before it's too late. I'm rooting for you." He slams the heel of his palm and the device clicks into place, causing my flesh to burn and sizzle. "Back to Hex, you go."

"No." I grab his arm and hold on tight as he opens the veil between worlds.

"Before I forget. This—" Poe taps the device lodged in my chest. "Drains you of your magic. You can't heal, can't teleport, can't go back to your demon realm home, can't do anything. Don't even try to fly, I've hidden your wings. Your magic will only work when you're summoned and then only to complete a bargain. Basically, you're stuck in Hex."

Before I can say anything else, he rips my dragon scale medallion from my throat, throws me through the veil, and seals it up behind me.

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GABE

I'm just about to my apartment building when the wind picks up and whistles in the trees. I clutch my purchases close to my chest as my heart pounds and sweat beads on my brow. Something isn't right.

Blinding white light flashes in front of me and I stumble back, trying to keep my footing, but it's no use. Something blue tumbles into me, knocking me flat on my ass and stealing my breath. I'm squashed beneath a hard body with horns precariously close to my eyes. See, I knew my feather would bring trouble, and here it is!

"Are you okay?" I squeak out as I pat a shoulder. There's blood coming from somewhere. They don't move and I do my best to push them off me.

It takes me a few minutes to get my bearings and push to my knees. The demon sprawled on the ground is stunning despite all the blood. The only clothing they wear is a pair of black jeans. A sculpted chest and abs are on display, and damn, these biceps make me drool. The demon is mostly blue, with spots of what appear to be tan human flesh color. Fangs poke from their slightly open mouth. Long lashes brush their high cheekbones. Short hair tangles in their horns. Their tail is lifeless. Blood leaks from their chest around a strange device that seems to be counting down. It's a mechanical number display that shows seven hundred and forty, with a second four already halfway leading to three. What's the significant of the numbers? Blood drips down their side and?—

The blood! It's not stopping.

"Hey. Uh." I reach for the strange counting disk in their chest. Maybe it comes off?

My fingers dance along the metal edge, looking for a way to wedge it away, but it doesn't budge. At least their chest rises and falls with their breath and they don't seem too distressed if you discount the whole being out cold part.

"Hey." I snap in their ear, trying to get a response and nothing. Cringing, I resort to a sternum rub, hoping for something and get nothing. I hate the idea of leaving them on the road. It's just not safe, even if they are a demon.

My apartment is mere feet away. I look from the door to the demon and back.

"We can make it. Probably." As long as I use magic, anyway. There's no way I'll be able to pick up this massive demon without it. I contemplate the demon, taking in every inch of them. What's the best way to drag them? The arm pits probably.

My cheeks blaze as I check the perimeter before digging my feather from my pocket and placing it in the waistband of the demon's jeans. It'll give me the boost I need to try this. I take a deep breath and focus on the tips of my fingers, willing my magic to flow. With my wings packed away, it's a little harder than if they were free, but I concentrate the best I can. My fingers tingle and when they glow white from the second knuckle down, I send my magic to the feather, wrapping around it, then around the demon like some intricate magical shibari.

"Light as a feather, stiff as a board," I chant softly and the demon stays rigid while I push to my feet, bringing them with me. I've found using kid games helps a lot in situations like this. I used Ring-A-Round-The-Rosie to trap a zombie some necromancer sent after me a couple years ago. Not exactly fun times.

Thankfully, I live on the ground floor in a two-story apartment building. I don't exactly want to explain why I'm levitating a demon as I dig my keys from my pocket. My eyes dart to my fallen purchases. I'll have to retrieve them after I get the demon settled.

Once I get the door open, I pull the demon through sideways with a bit of grunting. My feather starts to turn gray and I have to move fast if I don't want to drop the demon in the middle of my apartment. My couch won't do. They're still too big for my bed, but it's my best option. I tug on my magic until we're around the corner and into the hallway. But I'm losing them. They're no longer stiff as a board. Even as I continue to chant, their body loosens and they get so much heavier.

"Come on, just a few more?—"

My feather disintegrates and my magic fails. The demon falls awkwardly in the doorway of my bedroom.

"Well, shit," I mumble and stare. I'm trapped in my room unless I want to try and leap over the demon and I'd rather not accidentally fall right on top of them. There's no way I can get them completely through the door on my own.

The alarm on my phone goes off. Shit. Work. I fish my cell from my pocket to text Pike.

Gabe: I have a bit of a situation. I think I need help.

Pike: Sure, what can we do?

I nibble my bottom lip and take a picture to send to Pike, so he doesn't think I'm making this up.

Gabe: A demon situation?

The demon's still asleep and thankfully breathing. Can demons die? I tip my head, taking them in. They're ridiculously handsome and I hope they wake up soon because I want to know what their voice sounds like.

"Where the fuck?—"

I yelp and jump when Pike teleports behind me. When I spin to face him, he's staring at the demon sprawled on my floor.

"Where the fuck did you find Van?"

Once again, I take in the demon's appearance. "This is Van?" He does look a lot like Warwick now that Pike says that. "He ran into me? Literally."

"Fuck." Pike's eyes go wide when he squats and notices the device. "He's in big fucking trouble, too."

"Is that what the...thingy is? Trouble?"

Pike nods. "Looks like he's been given a month for... whatever his punishment is. Poe must have finally found him." He threads his fingers through his hair and stands again to pace. "We should tell Warwick."

"I'm sure he'd like to know his brother is back in town." I wipe at the crusty blood around the weird countdown device. I can't help it and press a hand to Van's cheek. A bit of color comes back to his flesh. "He's almost sweet, isn't he?" I thought I said the words to myself, but Pike snorts above me.

"Sweet, he is not. Loyal as fuck, absolutely. And if you piss him off, watch out." Pike

squeezes my shoulder. “It’s good to see him again. Not like this, but still good.”

I nod. “Will you help me get him into bed?” I wave to my sad excuse of an offering for the demon. “He probably shouldn’t be moved too much until he’s awake.”

When I try to pry off the device, Pike stops me. “You can’t remove it. It’s his punishment, and until he either succeeds or fails, it must remain.”

Pike already has Van up on his shoulder and carries the demon to my bed. While Pike gets Van settled, I rush to my kitchen and grab the big bowl I use for popcorn. I fill it with hot water as I rummage around for dishtowels. There have to be dishtowels somewhere. I had a whole stash of them?—

“He’ll be okay,” Pike says behind me, making me jump again.

“I don’t want to leave him.” I turn off the faucet and frown at my lack of dishtowels. Maybe they’re under the sink? I kneel to rummage around in the cabinet. “I feel responsible. Like if I wasn’t in the way when he teleported, he’d be okay.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s entirely on Van.”

I turn to glare at him.

Pike lets out a sigh and rubs a hand over his chest. “But I don’t want him left alone either. It’s like if I leave, he’ll disappear. He’s magic-less right now. He can’t disappear if he wanted to.” Pike drags a hand down his face. “Warwick needs to know. Can I leave Van in your hands?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks. Don’t be surprised if Wick shows up. But also don’t be surprised if he

doesn't show up. He's not as volatile as Van, but he's at least as unpredictable, and I can see him being pissed off enough that he doesn't wanna see Van anytime soon."

"So I can come in late?" I ask as I finally find my dishtowels crammed way in the back of the cabinet. All three of them. I would have sworn I had more.

"Take the night off and let me know as soon as he wakes up."

"I can't just?—"

Pike holds up a hand. "Don't worry about lost wages. I'm paying you to be his caretaker tonight. Deal?"

I give a quick nod and gather my supplies. "Deal." My eyes fall on my table and my bag from The Magic Shop somehow made it inside. Curious.

"Let me know as soon as he wakes up."

"Will do!" I waddle to my room with water sloshing up the side of the bowl.

Pike chuckles as he poofs out and I get to work cleaning up a sexy demon who happens to be in my bed now.

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4

VAN

Something smells divine. Like sunshine and rain and rainbows, if rainbows had a scent. I breathe deeper, trying to take in more of the scent, trying to drag it across my tongue to taste it. My body aches, which isn't something I'm used to at all. Even after a brawl in the Hell realm, I've never hurt this much. What the fuck did Poe do to me?

There's a slight weight on my chest.

"I hope you're okay with me touching you," someone whispers, then there's a light pressure on my face. The warm cloth instantly soothes me.

"I don't know who you are, but you can touch me anytime."

They squeak when I circle my hands around their waist. I'm enjoying the peace and quiet with my eyes closed, but I want to see who disturbs my slumber so sweetly. Also, why on earth are they sitting on me?

Slowly, I force my eyes open and suck in a breath. There's a halo of light illuminating their pretty black hair that just dusts their shoulders. It looks so damn soft with gentle waves. Brown eyes take me in as I imprint every detail of them into my memory. Their plush lips part and a pretty pink tongue pokes out to moisten them. They're slight build, but there's muscle there, too.

"Are you an angel?" The words blurt out before I can stop myself.

They shake their head and give me the smallest smile. “Close.”

What the hell does that mean?

“I’m Gabe. He him.” Gabe still hasn’t moved, and I don’t want him to. His t-shirt is covered in blood. My blood, I realize. He drops his gaze to my chest, right where the countdown device sits and his cheeks go pink. “I was told you’re Van. Nice to meet you, finally.”

“Hopefully, all the stories were good ones.” I smirk, knowing full well he’s probably heard all of my worse parts.

“They certainly entertained me.” The cutest grin graces his face, and I swear the halo gets brighter.

There’s a pop to our left and the familiar crackle of energy I know to be Warwick fills the room.

“Well, I knew what to expect from you, Van.” My brother crosses his arms over his chest and frowns at the two of us. “But Gabe, I thought you’d be able to resist my brother.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” Gabe says, going even pinker and scrambles to get off me.

“Aw, I want you to stay, angel,” I tease, as I tighten my hold around his hips.

Warwick ignores me to address Gabe directly. “You are straddling my brother. What do you think it looks like?”

Gabe squeezes his towel so hard the water drips into my chest. “I couldn’t reach

anything from the side of the bed and he was passed out and?—”

Wick’s lips twitch, and he doubles over. “I’m just giving you a hard time. I’m glad that of all the people to find him, it’s you.”

“I didn’t find him, he sorta?—”

“Poe shoved me through the veil right into Hex.” I growl, causing Gabe to shiver on top of me. If he doesn’t watch it, he’ll make me hard and I’m fighting as it is.

Wick’s glee fades away. “I wish you would have just faced the consequences earlier. Now you have to deal with this.” He waves a hand towards me and I assume he means the countdown.

“I’ve never been one to make things easy on myself.”

“I know.” Warwick runs a hand through his hair and gives me the look that says he wants to talk, and I owe him that. I owe him a lot.

The moment I release Gabe, he slides off me and scurries away with his bowl of water. I almost wish he’d stay.

Wick sits on the bed and I have to wonder if the frame will hold up, I’m already a lot of weight on it.

“You can’t keep doing this shit,” he says. He clutches the edge of the mattress like a lifeline and refuses to look at me. “I’m tired of being punished for your fuck ups. It’s exhausting.”

My stomach tumbles and I push myself up to sit, but my nerve endings are on fire and I have to grit my teeth. “What has Poe done?”

“Not him, you .” Wick pokes me in the stomach. “I’ve had to get double the deals since you ran away. You’d think Poe would have figured out you just don’t give a fuck back when he assigned me my crossroads at fifteen because of you.”

“I give a fuck,” I mumble.

“Funny way of showing it.” Wick’s never ever talked to me like this. We’re as close as can be. He’s the rational thinker while I’m... me.

I squeeze his shoulder. “You don’t understand. Poe?—”

“Poe is an excellent leader and if you can’t see that, you’re just not trying.” Wick pushes to his feet. “I love you, Van. But I can’t be around you until you get your act together. Your actions give me punishments. I’m tired, Van. So tired. And punishing me obviously doesn’t work to get you to stop acting like a selfish fool.”

“That’s why Poe is a shitty leader. I hadn’t realized that’s what he was doing.” I swipe a hand down my face. It’s obvious now that Poe was punishing Wick to get to me, but I’m not the brightest bulb sometimes.

“To everyone else, it was obvious what was happening. You don’t pay attention to anyone but yourself.”

“That’s not true!”

“Prove it then. Poe says you have one month. Figure it out because I don’t want to gather your ashes if you fail. I’m tired of being left behind.”

Before I can respond, Wick disappears.

“Well. Fuck.” I drop my head on the headboard and stare at the ceiling while trying to

drag in deep breaths. Wick's words jab me in the heart. I'm tired of being left behind. The statement whirls in my head over and over. I left him too, just like that. I thought I was doing the right thing. Killing Drake to protect my friends from the spiraling witch, then running. But running just put a bigger burden on Wick and gave me a countdown I might not survive.

Our childhood wasn't great. Mother dropped me off at the creche before I could lift my head. Then seven years later, she dropped Warwick off and told me to be a good big brother and take care of him.

Neither of our fathers wanted to raise a kid. And neither had our mother. It's been the two of us against everyone else. Surely he knows how much I love him? I'd do anything for Wick. I'd burn all the realms down for him.

"You must be hungry," Gabe says, as he re-enters the room with a paper plate containing a pile of sandwiches. "I don't know what you like, so I threw a few things between some slices of bread." He shrugs. "They're kinda plain, and dry, because I haven't been to the store in a while and I don't like a lot of condiments." A cute shiver runs across him as he hands me the plate. "Mayo is evil."

I stick out my tongue. "Very evil." I lift a slice of bread and examine his offering. Ham, turkey, cheese. All yummy foods. "Thank you." I set the plate on the nightstand beside me and grab the top sandwich.

Gabe tips his head. "I'll let you eat in peace."

"You don't have to go," I say, hoping he stays. My thoughts and memories can't take over.

His eyes dart to the corner and I realize the room has dozens of plants. "I'll be right back." He gives me another grin as he turns to leave again.

“I suppose you heard what Wick said?” I say before he gets too far.

“I did. Do you wanna talk about it?”

My shoulders drop. “If I’m honest, I don’t know.”

He nods and scurries out. The man doesn’t even know me, yet he’s shown me so much kindness. Maybe I can learn from him?

Before I can think too much more, Gabe’s back with a watering can.

“You know, it’s okay to be selfish, but not all the time.” He tips the spout of his watering can into a big bushy plant by the window. “When you’re selfish all the time, it irritates people.”

“I’m aware.” I bite into the sandwich. How the fuck is it so damn good?

“Pike texted me the details he could get out of Poe. Apparently, no other crossroads demon is allowed to help. They can’t offer you shelter, or food, or anything other than friendship.”

I grind my teeth and try not to show my irritation. I’d been hoping to stay over at Pike’s Hex house since I can’t go home. “That’s inconvenient.”

“I told him you can stay with me.”

My mouth opens and the bite I’d taken almost tumbles out. “What? You don’t even know me.”

He shrugs. “Pike trusts you, and I trust Pike. Lark trusts you and I trust Lark. Wick loves you, and?—”

“Do not say what I think you’re going to say.”

Gabe laughs. “I was going to say I trust Wick. He’s still so in love with Ethan no one is ever going to get in.”

“That’s Wicky. Lovesick over a silly human born witch.” I blanch at the idea of ever loving a human, magical or not.

“I think it’s sweet.”

“It’s sad.”

Gabe frowns at me and moves on to a different plant. “You could support him. It doesn’t take a lot to simply give him a bit of hope. That’s all he needs.”

“He’s wasting his fucking time. Ethan’s been sent away because he’s a power player for the Speller family. That arranged marriage he’s supposed to have any day now? Yeah, the Spellers won’t let him free unless every bit of magic is drained from the boy. There’s powerful magic at play keeping those two apart.”

“Perhaps. But that’s not how Wick sees it. He’s been searching for Ethan alongside doing double the work because of you. And what have you been doing?” Gabe waters a few more plants before leaving me to my thoughts again.

I’ve been having the time of my life fighting in the Hell realm because I didn’t want to face the consequences of killing someone outside of a deal. Hardly even thinking of Hex or my brother. I’ve been fighting off the urge to find more evil doers and ripping their heads off, but I don’t relish punishment. Punishment, my brother always ends up taking.

“Soda, juice box, water?” Gabe’s back with his arms full of drinks, and I blink back

at him.

“Why are you willing to help me?”

“That’s what I do. I help. I don’t have the constitution to be anyone significant like a doctor or nurse. But I can help in other ways.”

“Like teaching me a lesson.”

“Like giving you a place to stay. That said, you can stay, but I think you’ll need to pitch in for food. You probably eat a lot and I’ve only budgeted for myself.”

“All my money is?—”

Gabe lifts a hand. “You can get a job for the month if you need to. All I’m asking for is food money, which is probably the best deal you’ll find.”

It’s hugely generous for sure. “Hopefully, someone doesn’t mind if I pop in and out on the regular.”

“Speaking of. Pike said you can’t teleport unless someone summons you.” Gabe hands me a piece of paper. “That’s my address, so you can find your way back from your crossroads.” He tips his head toward the door. “The shower is that way. Get cleaned up and I’ll change the sheets.”

“I think I need a few more minutes.” I start in on the second sandwich.

“Of course. Take your time. Pike gave me the night off.”

“You work for Pike?”

“Bartender.” And there’s that grin again. Okay, that’s the goal. Keep Gabe smiling.

“I bet you get all the guys, gals, and pals all hot and bothered.”

“I keep busy.” He winks and the knowledge perks up my cock. I’d wondered if he was a prude.

I push to sit on the side of the bed and my head spins. “Oh, wow. That’s new.” It’s like my head goes swimming, but my body stays in the same spot.

Gabe rushes to me and grabs my shoulders. “Are you okay? Take a drink of water.” He opens the bottle and offers it to me. I gulp greedily before he snatches it away like a meanie. “Not so fast.” The back of his hand presses to my forehead. “Maybe you should stay in bed, you’re?—”

I grab his hand. “Angel, demons run hot.”

“Oh. Right.” And the blush is back. Blushing and grinning. That’s what I want.

“But, I do think…” My head spins and I fall back. I can’t keep my eyes open and sleep takes me again.

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5

VAN

When I wake once more, Gabe paces at the foot of the bed. He's on the phone with someone, but he's so quiet I can't hear him.

"Gotta go, I think he's awake again." Gabe shoves his phone in his pocket and rushes to my side. "Are you okay?" His eyes roam over my face and I want to reassure him.

I wave off his concern. "I'm fine."

"You were out for a day and a half."

"That long?" I swallow. That's not good.

"Yes. And you kept bleeding for a while."

It's now I notice towels bunched at my sides to catch said blood from the countdown device. "Sorry. I'll be fine, no doubt. But it occurs to me I don't have more clothes with me." I push to sit, but he presses a hand to my shoulder to keep me down.

"Stay put. You're still wounded."

I frown, even though I like his commanding energy. "I think you've nursed me pretty well. I should be good to take a shower and put on fresh clothes, but this is all I have to wear."

He nibbles his bottom lip and dabs at my chest with a damp cloth. “Okay. I’ll let you go, but the instant you feel bad, you’re laying down again.”

“Thank you.” I push to the edge of the bed, thankful that this time my head doesn’t swim.

Gabe watches me before he rushes to the small dresser across from the bed. “I have some clothes that should fit you until we get you more. Wren said he’d stop by your place in the demon realm and bring some over in the next few days.”

“Wren? I didn’t know you knew Lark’s brother so well.” I eye Gabe up and down. “And there’s no way anything of yours is going to fit me.”

“Wren and I are friends. He pops into Flutter and Fangs every few weeks. And the clothes aren’t mine. They were my dad’s. I couldn’t bear to get rid of them.” A shadow of sadness crosses over his face as he pulls a pair of navy blue sweatpants from the drawer.

“He must have been a lumberjack,” I say as I take the soft pants he hands me. My heart aches for his loss.

“Military. If you’re really ready, you can go shower, then we’ll discuss plans and rules and all that fun stuff. But only if you’re up to it. I don’t want to exhaust you.”

“Yes, sir.” I salute just to be silly and hopefully lift his spirits.

“Oh, I like that.” He gives me another wink and leaves me to stare at his retreating form. I have a feeling Gabe has lots of lovely little surprises to uncover.

Gabe

While Van's in the shower, I water the rest of my plants. I'm half afraid I'll forget in the morning, so I opt for now.

"Alright, little guys, do your thing." I lift my watering can to the violets in the white plastic gazebo I inherited from my grandmother. She's the reason I love plants so much. They make me feel like I matter, like I have something to take care of.

"Do you always talk to your plants?" The waistband of the sweatpants ride low on Van's sculpted hips, and it takes everything in me not to drool. Holy hell. He waves a hand in front of my face and I blink up at him.

"Sorry. Should have grabbed you a shirt, too." I shake my head and rush to my bedroom to grab one of dad's old t-shirts. Van's smirking at me when I hand it over without making eye contact. "There's been studies that plants thrive when you speak to them nicely. I'm always nice to my babies. They deserve the best soil, water, and whatever I can give them."

"I bet they all have names, too." Van side-eyes my hoyia hanging in the corner by the window right before sliding the t-shirt on.

"Absolutely! And they all have personalities and?—"

Van cocks a brow as he takes another step towards the kitchen table. "Plants do not have personalities."

"They do. Betty—" I wave to the hoyia.

"Betty?!" Van snorts as he rubs a finger across Betty's waxy leaves. "Betty?"

"Yes. Betty. She loves the sun and gets all sad when she doesn't have as much as possible. When it's outcast outside, she's droopy droopy."

“Isn’t that how plants work?”

“I mean... yes, but take Trevor, for example?—”

“Trevor? Are they all human names?” Van laughs as he continues to rub Betty’s leaves.

“Yes,” I mumble. “Maybe you are an asshole.” I cross my arms, not exactly meaning it. This is the usual reaction I get to my plant babies when I start talking about them.

“I’m definitely an asshole.” Van swipes his hands through his wet hair and squeezes. “Do I even enough time to change my ways? What if I can’t?”

“I think just the fact that you’re questioning if you can make it means you’re already trying to.” I want to reach out and squeeze his hand, but I don’t know how he feels about being touched and keep my hands to myself.

His mouth opens and closes. “Maybe.”

“And honestly, I don’t know that you’re really an asshole. Selfish, maybe ? I don’t know you. All I’ve heard are stories by your friends and enemies.”

“I have enemies?” Van snorts as he slides a chair from the table to sit. “I mean, of course I do. I’m me, it’d be stranger if I didn’t have enemies.”

I join him at the table and scoot in. “What I’m saying is all I’ve heard are stories from other people. So... prove them all wrong.”

Another snort. “But more than likely, they’re all true.”

“Then make a new story, Van. Rewrite your life. This is a new start. Take the

offering and run with it.”

“You sound like those hashtag manifesting people.”

“It’s nothing like that. You can set a new course for your life and maybe it’s better than what you have now.” I would know, but I’m not ready to tell him my whole life story. At least not yet.

“Aw, but right now, I got the nicest view in Hex.” Van winks and blows me a kiss. I fight off a grin because his pickup lines are so cringe, but I always fall for shit like that.

“Let’s get down to the rules. I’m not strict, but we’re both adults and I expect you to respect this place.” And my plant babies, but I keep that to myself. He probably already thinks I’m weird about them.

Van nods and gives me a one shoulder shrug. “I’ve always done my best to keep my place clean. Shouldn’t be hard.”

“Exactly. Around here we do not put things down, we put them away. Dishes don’t stay dirty in the sink.” I wave behind me. “They get washed, then stay in the drainer until I need them again.”

A half grin tugs at Van’s lips. “Noted. Though putting them in the cabinet might give you more space.”

“Some days I get them into the cabinet.” I chew my bottom lip and decide to just get out with it. “I’ve had to figure out my ADHD over the years. As long as I’m blasting music in my ears, I can get through any of my chores. But dishes and dusting. I’d rather step on Legos. So as long as I can get the dirty dishes clean and into the drainer, I’m good.”

“And I’m guessing dusting just gets forgotten?” Van asks as he looks around, no doubt inspecting my already ridiculously dusty floorboards. “Unless it’s your plant babies because Betty doesn’t have a speck of dust on her.”

“Not forgotten, per se. I always remember. But I choose to do other things, then feel guilty about it.”

“Sounds like a shitty cycle.”

I drop my head back. “It is. I’m so exhausted by the idea of dusting that I just don’t.”

“I’ll do it.” Van scratches his jaw. “I’ll pick up weekly dusting and a few other chores, since you’re sweet enough to let me stay for the cost of food.”

“Perfect. I have my chore chart on the fridge.” This is going way easier than I anticipated. But I hadn’t known what to expect when I offered the demon my apartment.

Van gets up to examine the chart and as he does, he swipes his finger over the top of the fridge and shows it to me. We both wince.

I drop my head to my hands. “That’s so gross.”

Van washes his hands and his tail wraps around his waist. I’m always fascinated by the tails of demons that come into Flutter and Fangs. They’re always so expressive, as if they have a mind of their own.

“Personal question,” I start.

“Only if I get to ask one, too.” Van leans against the counter and watches me.

“That’s fair.”

“Then shoot.” He crosses his arms over his chest and waits for me.

“What does your tail feel like? Do you know when it’s moving? Is that your influence or?—”

“That’s three questions, angel.” His tail unwraps from around him and, like a cobra, strikes towards me.

“Then you can ask me three, of course.” I lift a hand and with my eyes silently ask if I can touch him. Thankfully, Van gets my meaning, and he tips his head.

“Yes, I know when it’s moving and, for the most part it is me directing it. But sometimes, I don’t know, sometimes it just does its own thing and I stop it when I realize.”

I brush my fingers over the barbed parts. They’re more like bumps though now that I see his tail up close. “Oh! It’s soft.”

“Mmm hmmm,” he purrs. “And sensitive. It’s an erogenous zone, just like my horns.”

My eyes flick up to his horns, and my hands itch to test him, but I refrain.

“My tail usually has a glamor over it to look properly barbed, but Poe stripped me of my magic. So here’s my tail in all its boring glory.”

“Why’d you want a barbed tail?” I ask.

“Why not?” He shrugs and his tail slithers around my hands. “It keeps people from

touching my tail if they think there are barbs that'll hurt them."

"You don't want your tail touched?" I stop my caresses.

"Not without my permission, no. It's like someone stroking my cock."

My face heats thinking of all the times someone has reached out to touch one of the demon's tails at Flutter and Fangs. Not me, I kept those inside desires inside and I'm glad I have.

Van tips my chin to look him in the eye. "What is going on in that pretty head of yours? You're too cute to scrunch your face like that."

I snort and I pull my hands from his tail. "Nothing. Let's finish the talk, because I have a few more things to discuss."

"By all means, continue." Van waves toward me as he settles back into the seat across the table, taking his tail with him.

"No loud parties and no pets. Both are part of my lease agreement."

"Doable." Van nods as he steeples his fingers and leans in.

"And... please don't bring sexual partners over until we figure out an arrangement."

A sly grin falls over Van's face. "No problem. Now, I think you owe me three answers, and sex is a topic I love very much."

"I have nothing to hide." But I pick at the edge of my table, hoping he doesn't ask anything super embarrassing.

He lifts a hand and holds up his pointer finger. “Are you part of the Rainbow brigade? I’m very gay.” Adds his middle finger. “If so, what’s your preference? Me?” He presses his other hand to his chest. “I’m verse.” And the ring finger joins when he asks, “Have you ever been to an orgy? My favorite pastime.”

It takes a moment for my brain to process that last question. “No orgies.” I lick my lips and have to suppress a shiver when he gives me a little fake pout. “Bisexual. I lean closer to wanting guys as partners, but I’m attracted to everyone, apparently. And holy crap are there attractive people in Hex. And I’m an exclusive top.”

“What?!” His hand flies to his chest and I can’t tell if he’s being genuine or if it’s theatrics.

“What do you mean what? What part requires that kind of reaction?” Surely it’s not about me being bi?

“Exclusive top? Who’s an exclusive anything these days?”

My mouth opens and closes a couple of times and I can’t decide what to say, so I clamp it shut.

“How do you not enjoy the delights of an anal orgasm? I like it more than topping most days.”

“I’ve never had the delights of an anal orgasm,” I mumble.

“You’ve never bottomed?” His mouth drops open.

“That’s not what I said. I’ve never?—”

His eyes flash with something I can’t catch, and his face goes stormy. “Someone hurt

you, didn't they?"

"Let's move on."

"I'm not saying it's bad to be an exclusive top. Just think you're missing out is all. Perhaps I can show you what it's like when your partner wants you to get off, too."

"I didn't say I was interested." But I am. Especially if it's this sexy demon offering to teach me.

"That's fine. You gotta get used to the idea." He winks and pushes back to his feet.

My mouth goes dry. It's not that I never want to bottom again, I just haven't trusted anyone since those first few times. I've always been interested in bottoming with someone that knows what they're doing and not some bumbling teenager taking what they can get.

Despite implying I have regular hook ups, I don't actually sleep around. I like being exclusive with my partner and it's been years since I've dated anyone.

The last was Cassandra. She cheated on me, and it was because of her hang up. She was too uncomfortable with me being femme-ish, but I don't apologize for being me. If I want to wear bows in my hair or on my shoes, I will. If I want to paint my nails and wear bracelets, I will. If I want to wear makeup, I will. But it was the height difference that did us in.

She was six foot two to my five foot eight. I never had a problem with it. She was gorgeous and had the best personality. And o.m.g. the sex was fire. At least, I thought it was. I never understood why she made the choice to cheat on me in my own damn apartment. Why bring a guy back to your boyfriend's place? She cried when we broke it off. Even apologized. I wished her well, and we parted ways.

“Gabe?” Van startles me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“You okay?” His tail lifts and hesitates before moving toward me to land on my shoulder.

“Fine,” I whisper. “I’m fine.” Though my mind keeps trying to go back to that dark place that I’m not worthy of having a partner that loves me the way I am.

“You really don’t look fine.” Van’s tail tips my chin up. Concern fills his eyes, and I have to wonder why everyone calls him selfish.

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6

VAN

This sweet angel is upset and I don't know what to do. If it were Wicky or Pike or even Lark, I'd crack a joke and get them laughing, but I don't know Gabe enough. I don't exactly want to offend or piss him off, either.

"So, what do you do around here for fun?" I ask instead. If he's off for the night, we can entertain ourselves somehow. Despite my sad attempts at flirting with him, my body isn't exactly in the best shape for sex.

"I'm not sure you should be doing too many fun things just yet. You might be recovering from a concussion." His big soul searching eyes look up at me.

"I don't think demons get concussions?"

"Isn't your healing connected to your magic?" His eyes drop to my chest, which annoyingly is oozing... something through the shirt. Gross.

I let out a dramatic sigh. "It is."

"Then maybe we shouldn't do anything too fun. Maybe watch something on TV?"

"No, thank you. Sounds boring."

"What about this?" Gabe starts. "You be a good patient for another day, and I'll take

you on an adventure.”

That perks me up. “What kind of adventure?”

“One you can’t even imagine.”

“Okay, I’ll hold you to it. I want you to blow my mind.”

“Promise.” He grins so brightly I can’t help my own smile.

Two hours later and I’m glaring at Gabe as he hums to himself. He’s been trying to teach me how to knit a basic scarf, but it doesn’t make sense to me and I’m pretty sure my hands are too big for the craft.

“What’s wrong?” He sets his knitting needles down and holds his hand out for my sad excuse of a scarf. Well, a few lines of scarf because it’s nowhere scarf shaped at all.

“I’m really bad at this. Can’t we do something else?”

“You’re not bad at it, you’re just new. No one is perfect right at the start.” He picks at a few of my stitches and I grumble under my breath. “It’s really calming if you let it be. But if you really want to try something else…” His gaze flicks toward a plant in the corner.

“I’m good.” I pick up my knitting needles and try to figure out how to start again.

Gabe picks up his project and holds it up so I can watch him. I get lost in him and forget my scarf. His face is tranquil, and he’s focused. “My grandma taught me how to knit because she thought it’d help my ADHD. It does a lot of times. But other things work better.”

I nod. “I wish I had someone that wanted to help me when I was a kid. I probably wouldn’t be a train wreck.”

“It’s never too late. You can take control of your life and see what works for you. I need cleanliness and something to occupy my brain or my mind gets all itchy.”

“My brain is itchy all the time. Always running away with me. So is my temper.”

“So I hear. But I think it can be reined in. It’s up to you, though. You make your choices, no one else.”

He has a point, but I won’t say that out loud. I don’t know how Gabe has the patience with me, but I’m grateful. We spend the night with me complaining about getting the stitches wrong until we sit in the living room with him on the coffee table and me on the couch. He walks me through each step so slowly it must upset him, but he doesn’t show it.

We both jump at the knock on the door. Gabe leaves me to see who it is and I’m relieved it’s Wren.

“Grabbed what I could fit in the bag. Let me know if there’s anything else you want and I’ll grab it too.” Wren blows me a kiss, which surprisingly makes Gabe go red.

“Thanks,” Gabe says, taking the bag. “I think he’s getting tired of my dad’s clothes. You can come in. I’m just teaching Van how to knit.”

Wren lifts a white brow. “I think I’m good. Thanks though.” Wren pops out and I wonder why he didn’t just teleport right into the living room instead of using the door.

“Thanks for asking Wren to fetch these for me.” I take the bag. “And thanks for

letting me borrow your dad's clothes."

He shakes his head. "I'm just glad I had something for you to wear." He yawns and I push to my feet.

"Come on, I think it's time to put my angel to bed."

Again, he shakes his head. "I'll sleep out here. You can have the bed."

"No, babes. I'm not taking your bed another night. At least not without you in it." I wink and pull him to his feet. "I do love cuddling."

"When you put it like that..." He nibbles his bottom lip. "Just cuddling. Nothing else right now."

"Promise, though that implies we might get up to shenanigans some other time."

"I won't rule it out." He leads the way to the bedroom. He's already in pajamas and I want to rip them off him, but refrain.

The bed's a little too short for me to be comfortable, but that only means we have to really cuddle. He curls in and I wrap myself around him, tucking him under my chin. My tail won't settle no matter what I do.

"Can you cuddle my tail? He's too awake still."

Gabe opens his arms and I bring my tail in where he snuggles close. I think he's forgotten how sensitive it is, but like this, all I can think about is how adorable he is and how tired I am.

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7

VAN

It's late afternoon and I've waited long enough. "I've been good. Now what's my adventure?"

Gabe grins and takes my hand. "A walk to the community garden and?—"

"There's a community garden?" Of course there is and of course he knows about it.

"Yeah, and it's full of so many strange vegetables from other realms. I love it there. And every night there's a wood nymph that comes out to sing. They're really nice and have a lot of stories."

"A wood nymph?" Why am I not surprised? Every type of creature seems to find its way into Hex. Though I guess that was the original plan of the town, a safe haven for supernatural types in need.

"Yes," Gabe laughs. "A wood nymph. Sometimes when I can't sleep, I drag myself down to the garden and listen to their songs until I can't keep my eyes open anymore."

"Alright, let's do it." It'll be better than staring at each other all night, though that's no hardship.

"We have to wait until the sun goes down." Gabe looks to the kitchen window where

the sun blazes brightly.

Something flitters to the floor out of nowhere, and I bend to pick it up. It's the size of a playing card. "Why do you have a tarot card?" It's two-sided. One sided labeled The Empress, the other The Consort.

"That's what that is? I thought it was a bookmark. It came in a book I got at The Magic Shop."

"We have a magic shop?"

Gabe chuckles, and it's magical. Sun comes in from the window just right, giving him a halo again. "Pike and Lark asked the same thing. I can take you there. That's fun, but I was just there right before we met."

I snort as I set the card on the table. "That's one way of putting it, I guess." Yet again, my punishment affects someone else.

He gives me another adorable grin and I really, really wish I could take pictures with my mind. I wonder how long it'll take before he gets annoyed with me, like everyone else.

"Actually, yes. Let's go to The Magic Shop while we wait for the sun to go down." Gabe bounces to his feet.

"Sounds good to me." I hate having nothing to do.

"Oh, wait! You need shoes." Gabe chews on his bottom lip as he stares at my feet, so I wiggle my toes.

"Nope. I'm good. Don't like shoes anyway, so I don't wear 'em."

“If you’re sure?”

“Absolutely sure.” I throw my arm around his shoulders and pull him in. “Lead the way, my cute little Hex guide.”

He snorts at that, and I let him go. “I don’t know that you can call me a guide. Isn’t your crossroads in Hex? You’d know more than me.”

We get out the door and he locks up.

“Sure, my crossroads is here, but I lived in the demon realm most of my life and just popped in when I got summoned. Then Pike got summoned and fell in love with Larky Poo and I kinda started hanging around them in Hex. I stuck to Flutter and Fangs because that’s where Wicky started hanging out, too. So the few things I know about this place is what you’ve just told me. We have a magic shop and a community garden. There’s Flutter and Fangs, and my crossroads is at—” My mouth seals shut and the stupid magic smooths out my face, making it look like I don’t even have a mouth. Damn it, I forget I can’t tell people where it is. They have to find it on their own or someone else tells them. I can’t even walk Gabe right up to it because the magic will kick me out of bounds every time. I have to be summoned.

Gabe sucks in a breath and stumbles back. I catch him with my tail before he can fall. Hesitantly, he cups my cheeks as we wait for the magic to drain away. “Are you okay?” he asks.

Why does no one ever ask demons that? I blink back at him, not able to form words. I can’t even think of words to say right now and nod. My mouth feels sticky when the magic fades and we’re just looking at each other.

“That has to be scary when it happens.”

I shake my head. “It’s better than if I wanted to tell you how to free me from my crossroads, which I don’t.”

“What happens then?”

“The magic will seal away my mouth and nose so I can’t breathe at all.”

“I’m glad my magic can’t do anything like that to me.” Gabe shivers as he hugs himself.

“Speaking of magic...” I poke him a few times with my tail, drawing out a laugh. “What are you?” I lean down to sniff him and there’s a magic seal somewhere blocking his true scent.

“Isn’t it a little rude to ask?” His hands drop to his waist as he grins at me, so I know he’s not mad.

“I’m a demon. I’m rude. And an asshole. Don’t get attached.”

“Too bad. I think I already am.” Gabe slams a hand over his mouth and groans. “Me and my big mouth.”

“I like your pretty mouth.”

Gabe’s blush flushes his cheeks as he turns on his heel and starts walking.

“Hey, whatever you are, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I’m not embarrassed. But you’ve already said you’re not into humans, so I shouldn’t?—”

“Angel, you’re not human. I can tell that much. But I’m not liking whatever shenanigans you have going on that keeps your true self hidden away.” Not at all. I wave my hand through his aura and it doesn’t tell me the complete story either.

“I’m half human. Dad’s side. I’m not ashamed of it or him. He was an amazing dad. And?—”

“Gabe. What are you?”

“You don’t like that Ethan guy and he’s human.”

“I have beef with humans because they toy with people’s hearts. I will admit that Ethan’s a good kid. Or adult. Whatever.” I roll my eyes. “Also, think about it. I’ll probably think no one is good enough for Wick. And right now, yes, I am irritated at Ethan for running away.” Though I know full well, he was head over heels puppy love in love with my brother when he disappeared. There’s definitely magic involved, but a demon and a witch, even a born witch, don’t belong together. Witches just don’t live long and we demons are practically eternal once we’re born. I scratch at the device in my chest and frown. I sigh and my shoulders drop. “It’s okay if you don’t wanna tell me.”

“It’s... not that. Most people avoid me. They get this feeling or something that I’m different. It was so hard making friends before. Hex is... paradise. Everyone’s accepted me and?—”

“I accept you as you are. I just don’t like unsolved mysteries and you’re a mystery.” My eyes brush over him, taking in every sweet feature. That strange halo effect is back, but I can just be imagining it. Then there’s a dark shadow looming over him, but I can’t make out the shape. It’s like a pair of huge black feathered wings, and it dawns on me. “You’re a nephilim.”

“Yeah.” Gabe’s gaze drops to the ground, and he scuffs at the road with the tip of his shoe.

“Gabe.” He doesn’t look at me, and I use my tail to tip his chin up, but he still refuses. “Outside of Hex, no one understood what the heck they were feeling around you. I’m not sure when you sealed everything away, but Hex is the best place to let yourself free. No one will give you grief here. No one .” And if they do, I’ll gladly take any punishment Poe might want to dole out when I break the rules to teach someone a lesson.

“I know.” He grins at me as he finally makes eye contact again. “I just... I don’t know how to be a nephilim. I can use my magic, but I taught myself from the internet.”

My mouth drops open. “No. No, no no no no no no no . You never ever ever ever learn magic from the internet. Humans have no idea what true magic is. So you’re probably?—”

Gabe lifts his hands where his fingertips glow and spark white light. “I used magic to get you inside my apartment, so humans must know something .”

“Of course they’ll get something right every time. But—” I shiver at the idea of using human knowledge for magic. “No. I’m teaching you magic. Magic and sex. Oh, maybe sex magic!”

Gabe’s grin grows bigger. “I still haven’t agreed to the sex part, but I’ll take the magic lessons for sure.”

“Angel, I’ll woo you into those sex lessons.” I blow him a kiss, but if he really doesn’t want sexy lessons, I’ll drop it. “Now, where is that magic shop?”

Gabe picks up speed the closer we get to The Magic Shop. That's literally what it's called. The Magic Shop.

"The Owner is so nice, I really like him," Gabe says and a sprig of jealousy tries to bloom from my heart. It takes everything in me not to bare my teeth and growl even though the two of us met mere days ago.

The red script is a little hard on the eyes, but whatever. The strip mall seems like a weird place to me. I feel like a shop like this should be in one of the old houses that line the main road into Hex, but what do I know?

"Back so soon?" A tall guy with a black silk top hat says as soon as Gabe bursts through the door. The intense scent of incense knocks me in the face and I stumble back a few paces before getting my bearings.

"Yep, and brought a friend this time." Gabe practically sparkles with excitement. His entire body glows just like Lark's wings. I don't think I've met a nephilim before, so I don't know if they normally glow when they're happy or if Gabe is just special. Of course we all joke that Wick's part angel because he has feathered wings, but who knows who his father is?

"The missing demon," Top Hat Guy says.

"That's me. Evil killer just trying to keep people safe." My hands fist and my tail curls like one, too. The more I think about the Drake situation, the more angry I get. I shouldn't have to be punished for protecting those I've claimed as mine. Hex is a haven, and Drake spoiled it with his ill intentions. My tail flicks and catches flame.

"Van?" Gabe's voice snaps me out of my haze of irritation and I quash out the flames with my mind.

“Didn’t call you evil, nor a killer.”

“Right. Sorry. Thoughts got away with me.” I bow with a theatric flourish. “I’m Vanderburgh.”

Gabe snorts as his long fingers graze over the countertop right in front of Top Hat Guy. “Wait, like the neighboring county?”

“Like the neighboring county. Hence why I go by Van. Vanderburgh is such a mouthful.”

Gabe’s lips twitches as if he’s holding back a laugh. Or a joke.

Top Hat Guy tips his head in acknowledgement. “Well, Van, what can I do for you?”

I spin and take in the shop. It’s quaint, and just seeing the library ladders makes me itch to play on them, but for Gabe, I’ll refrain. “I believe we’re just looking until the sun goes down?”

Gabe shrugs. “Unless you got in new plants over the last few hours?” He’s so damn hopeful.

Top Hat Guy shakes his head. “How about a tarot reading while you wait?”

“Oh, I haven’t had my cards read in a while.” I sidle up to the counter where Top Hat Guy reaches over and grabs something from my t-shirt pocket.

“I wondered where that’d gone off to.” Top Hat shows us that strange Consort/Empress card before shuffling it into a deck that seems to have appeared out of nowhere. “The cards get up to no good sometimes.”

“That’s the card that was in my book!” Gabe says.

“Curious,” is all Top Hat Guy says. The three of us go silent as he shuffles. “Anything in particular you’d like guidance on?”

Gabe taps his lips with his pointer finger as he thinks. “I don’t know.”

I hop up on the counter with my tail flicking around behind me like a cat. “What about how to learn my lesson so I can lose this ASAP?” I lift my shirt to reveal the countdown device ticking away. Okay, it doesn’t actually tick, thank fuck. But it’s annoying just knowing it’s there.

“What’s your lesson?” Top Hat Guy asks as he continues his shuffling.

I wave my hand around. “Something about not being selfish and losing my temper. I think it’s bullshit. I was protecting my family when I killed Drake, but no one ever listens to me. They just say how selfish I am?—”

“That you ran away,” Top Hat Guy says. When I glare at him, he holds his hands up. “That’s what the rumors say.”

“So you do know what’s going on,” I grind out.

“A bit.” He goes back to shuffling and I have no idea where Gabe’s gone off to.

I growl and try to keep my tail from igniting again. “Then don’t act like you don’t. Why wouldn’t I have run? I broke the stupid rule that says I can’t kill someone outside of a deal. Poe has a hard-on for his stupid rules and doesn’t hesitate to dole out punishment.”

“What would have happened if you had just gone to Poe and explained?” Top Hat

Guy keeps his eyes on the tarot cards.

“I’ll never know, I guess.” I let my shirt drop to cover the device.

“Perhaps, next time, talk to him instead of running?”

“No.” I hop off the counter and cross my arms. “That’s not how I roll.”

Top Hat Guy just nods and holds out the deck of cards. “Cut the deck however you want, then draw a card.”

Being extra, I cut the deck into seven piles, then flip the top card from the middle pile. “Son of a bitch,” I laugh out.

“The Consort,” Top Hat Guy says. “Curious.”

We both look up to find Gabe watching us with wide eyes and his hands behind his back, like he’s hiding something. “Uh...”

“What do you have there, Gabe?” Top Hat Guy asks as the nephilim walks up to the counter to present none other than his own Consort card.

“I think it likes me.”

“Or the deck’s rigged,” I growl out as my battle with flame dies and both my tail and horns catch fire.

“Never,” Top Hat Guy says and I swear his eyes flash.

“Maybe coming here was a bad idea.” Gabe grabs my hand and the flare of anger falls away and sinks into the floor.

“No. I’m fine.” I suck in a breath and squash out the flames again . “I’m fine.” Shit, maybe I do have a problem. I turn to face Gabe and lean against the counter with my arms sprawled over it like I owned the place.

“No harm done,” Top Hat Guy says. “And I think your solution may be Gabe. Perhaps he can teach you how to be less selfish and calm your temper. The Consort, or Empress card, represents nurturing, abundance, fertility, femininity, beauty, connection to the divine. And have you met Gabe?” There’s a hint of a smile. “He’s fairly balanced between femininity and masculinity in a way few people are. He embraces himself, for the most part.”

“Gabe is practically the card himself.” I look the man over and take in every inch while he stands there looking adorable. What even are those shoes with the little bow at the ankle? But they look perfect on Gabe. I’m sure Gabe looks perfect in anything.

“Exactly.” Top Hat Guy goes back to shuffling the cards. “He has a few things to learn, but perhaps you can teach each other lessons.”

“Oh, I have a few lessons for sweet Gabe.” I trail my tail across his jaw. “If he’ll let me.”

“You’re such a tease,” Gabe answers as the prettiest blush blooms over his cheeks.

“Not a tease if I promise to follow through, angel.”

Top Hat Guy leans in to whisper so damn softly I have to strain to hear him, “don’t play with him. Past lovers never treated him well.”

“Got it,” I whisper back. Gabe is one person I hope to never piss off, but we’ll see what happens. “Would you look at that? The sun’s going down. Thanks for the reading. I’ll take it into consideration before I fuck something else up.”

The guy just chuckles as I take Gabe's hand and head out of The Magic Shop. I suck in deep breaths as fresh air hits my face. Incense is evil. It curls into my lungs and makes it hard to think. I'm still holding Gabe's hand. My tail itches to wrap around him and pull him closer, but I refrain. He's got a goofy grin on his face and I can't help but watch him. His eyes flit across the horizon and I tip my head to look at the sky like he is.

"Oh, wow," I let out. The sky isn't usually so beautiful in the demon realm, though my realm has its own charm. The fleeting clouds are painted fiery orange, and pink, and purple. When I'm in the human realm, I stay inside. Inside Flutter and Fangs, to be exact. I hardly venture out, but if the sky is this beautiful at night, what's it like during the day?

"Pretty isn't it?" Gabe squeezes my hand. We just stand here, admiring the clouds and the colors, and I don't itch to move.

GABE

I don't know how long we stare into the horizon watching the clouds change colors and the sun go down, but I'm glad for the peace of it all. I never got that before when I lived with humans. Never could just... stop. Humans are always go go go, even making their hobbies a show of how much they can do. It was exhausting. But here, in Hex, I can breathe. I can enjoy my plants and not feel like I have to have the best ones to enter into a contest or anything. I don't have to sell them anymore to keep up with life costs. There's no hustling. I can just be Gabe.

Van's hand is hot in mine, but doesn't make me sweat. His tail gets restless before he does and makes me laugh when it slithers up my calf.

I cough into my free hand. "Your tail seems to have a mind of its own right now."

"Oh. No. That's me." Van gives me a cheeky grin and tightens his tail before releasing me.

"It's okay." I squeeze his hand and he seems to relax even more.

The barest hint of music floats towards us, and I take the lead to the community garden. It's one of my favorite places in all of Hex.

We cross the street and walk down the sidewalk past all the old houses owned by the Speller coven, with one slot noticeably empty.

“Have you ever heard a wood nymph’s song?” I ask.

The sidewalk makes way to a dirt path.

“Never even met a wood nymph,” Van says.

“You’re in for a real treat, then. Oh, and you know how The Magic Shop is bigger once you go inside? The garden is like that, too. Actually, a lot of places in Hex are like that.”

“Good to know. Flutter and Fangs just seems like a normal building.”

I shrug. “F and F is a normal building. As in, it’s not bigger on the inside, but there is magic.”

Van swallows. “Do you think Pike’s mad at me?”

I shake my head even before I know what to say. “I think he’s relieved to have you back. No one knew where you were. Wick is...”

“Oh, Wick is definitely pissed at me.”

I shake my head again. “I don’t think he is. Disappointed? Sure. But pissed? No. I know he’s happy to have you back. Wick doesn’t seem the type to get pissed. At least not the version Wick puts on in front of me, anyway. He’s got a lot going on in his head.”

“He does.” Van releases my hand and I miss his heat, but let him go.

“I heard the conversation you had with him at my apartment.”

“I know.” He rubs his hand over his face and sighs.

“Why was he punished at fifteen for you?” I’m too curious not to ask, though it’s probably rude.

“I pissed Poe off.”

“But what happened?” I urge. Perhaps everything has always been a misunderstanding.

Van lets out a dramatic sigh. “Why not? I was twenty. Pike was twenty-two. He always forgets he’s actually older than me.” Van chuckles at his memory. “The two of us got drunk, but I got summoned, taking him with me. He’d had his own crossroads since he was fifteen, also because of me and a prank gone wrong.” Van swipes his hand across his face again. “What the fuck is this humidity about? The Hell realm isn’t even like this.”

“Don’t get distracted.” I take his hand again and he lets out a contented sigh.

“I may have gone against the rules and done a deal for free. I made Pike hide the fact, and since he was wasted off his ass, he didn’t even remember he was there when he sobered up. But Poe knew. Somehow Poe knew everything.”

“Why’d you do it, though?”

“Because the girl shouldn’t have had to pay for the deal.”

My brows scrunch as I think. “Why not?”

Van crosses his arms, and his tail wiggles like a snake ready to strike. “She was assaulted and her violater was never caught. Not until me.” He thumps a hand to his

chest and winces when it hits the device. “She wanted justice, and I agreed. I plucked the image of the man from her memory and when I realized what he’d done to her, I refused payment. I found the guy, brought him to her, and ripped his fucking head off.”

“And Poe was upset with this?” I’ve met Poe a handful of times when he stops off at Flutter and Fangs for a bit of HellFire, but he always came across as a good guy. Though maybe I shouldn’t, maybe I should remember demons aren’t human and don’t have human morals.

Van’s arms drop and his tail droops. “I ran away. I knew Poe would find fault in my reasoning, but?—”

I hold up my free hand. “Do you always run away?”

“Yes.” Van scratches at his elbow and refuses to look at me. “It’s easier than facing the music.” His lips twitch. “Speaking of music...”

“We’re almost there,” I say as cornstalks get closer. When I stop at the gate, Van cocks his brow at me.

“Why are we in the middle of a cornfield?” He looks around as I squat to press my hand to the ground to gain access.

Stone rumbles against stone as the gate flickers into view and parts for us. Van stumbles back and I grab his hand before he can fall. “Welcome to the Hex community garden.” I tug him through the gate.

“I was not expecting all of this.” His tail wiggles and his head’s on a swivel.

People rush around tending to their plots or setting up a spot to enjoy the wood

nymph's performance from a distance. Chimes tinkle somewhere I can never place. Everyone always helps to keep the pathways clear of vegetation.

A few witches hunch over a plot and whisper enchantments over their herbs. A cat shifter snuggles down into a plot of catnip. I can't tell if it's Sparkle, one of the former dancers from Flutter and Fangs. He's a bartender with me now when he's not pole dancing or giving pole dancing classes.

Van's eyes grow wide. "It's amazing in here."

"I know. Come on, it gets better." We scramble past a dragon shifter wrapping themselves around a clutch of eggs. I've discovered dragon shifters are subtly different in their human forms than demons.

While they both have horns, dragons don't have the wily tails and they have scales that run up their arms most of the time. They have to talk with the council before they shift if they want to fly, since the council needs to make sure the wards extend to enough of the sky for the dragon to get the best flight. Most dragons just go to another realm, but sometimes they want to fly in Hex.

I love the scent of earth and the various vegetation around. We have fruit trees in their own area, too, and I love walking through the citrus trees just to breathe them in.

"It's like... I don't even know. Wait, is that—" Van squints.

"A small winery? Yep. The Speller Coven takes care of it. They have dozens of different types of wine with magic infused into them."

"Spellers." Van grinds his teeth and his mood sours.

"Van, Hex is thriving since Drake's been gone. His mother took over the coven, and

the leadership has been phenomenal. I may not have been here all that long, but even I know the effect Drake had on this place. He was evil. Even his own mother condemned him.”

“She did?”

“Yes, I had to learn the history of Hex to get the permit to live here and believe me. He was a dark cloud.”

“I hated him. As soon as I could do something about him, I did.”

“I know and I hate...” I nibble my bottom lip and look away. “I hate that you ran away before you could see all the good. So I’m glad you’re here now.”

Van stops to stare at me. “You’re so...”

It’s my turn to tense up. Strange. He’s going to say strange. That’s what everyone thinks.

“Sweet.”

My cheeks burn as his finger traces my jaw.

“I’m just me. Plain ol’ Gabriel. And most people think I’m offputting.”

“Those people are wrong. Lark is sweet, but I think you have him beat.” His thumb grazes my bottom lip. It takes everything in me not to open my mouth and suck him in. What is this demon doing to me?

“Uh, come on, this way, we’re almost there.” I break the haze that seemed to fall over us and he shakes his head as if trying to clear it.

We walk in silence the next several blocks worth of garden. Not that the garden is silent, not in the least. There's an empty field to our left where no one's claimed a spot and a few kids play with a ball.

"What the ever loving fuck?" comes from Van when he sees the small outdoor amphitheater. Decades ago the Speller coven rose the ground to form seats and a stage. It used to be for more sinister gatherings, but since the 90s and community garden got started, it's used for art performances. Or so my Hex literature assures me.

Magic glows like fireflies all around us. Just little globes lighting the way and we follow the path.

"I like sitting up front, but we don't have to," I say as I start for my favorite spot, front and center.

"I'm good wherever, angel. Lead the way."

We're on a slope and it takes a bit of work to not clomp all the way down the packed dirt stairs. It's not crowded tonight, thank goodness.

"If you ever can't sleep, there are hammocks set up over there." I gesture to the section to our left, where about two dozen net hammocks wait for people. "They're really comfy."

"I'll take that into consideration."

"I'm not kicking you out," I blurt. "You're still welcome to stay at my house. It's more comfy if you ask me." I wave to the boxes in front of the stage. "And if you need food, there is always communal food to eat while you're here. Or to take. It doesn't really matter." I shrug and realize the food problem won't really be a food problem now that I think of it. "Actually?—"

“I’ll still pitch in for food. Demons can’t live off of just salad and meat is expensive.”

“Fair enough.” I find my favorite spot and Van laughs behind me.

“How often do you come here? There’s a perfect Gabe ass shaped indentation in this dirt.”

My cheeks heat again. “A lot, and I’m not ashamed of it.”

“Gabe!” Nef hops off the stage and wraps me in their limbs before their feet hit the ground. Actual tree limbs. Their willowy arms pet my shoulders and a few yellow leaves fall from atop their head from among their long deep brown hair. “I hoped you’d come tonight. I have a new set and I think you’ll love it.” Their green eyes gleam in the magical light.

“Can’t wait.” I laugh as their leaves tickle my face. Slowly, their limbs let me back down on my own two feet.

“I assume this is the wood nymph?” Van asks, jaw clenched. His tail snaps behind him as it whooshes from side to side so fast it’s a blur.

Nef chuckles. “Oh, I’ve seen that look before. Don’t be jealous, we’re just friends and will stay only friends. I’m not one for romance. Ever.” They shiver and stick their tongue out. “I’m Nef, they/them.”

Van introduces himself. “Sorry for... the growling.”

Nef lifts a shoulder. “Used to it. But I’m not about to steal your man. Unless it’s for a night of music making. Literal music making, not a euphemism for sex. Ew.” Nef shivers again and shakes out their hands.

Van's eyes go wide. "I can not imagine a life without sex."

"I get that a lot, too." Nef laughs and more leaves shake from their hair.

"Wait." Van turns to me. "You—" he waves his hand between me and Nef. "Play music together?"

"Gabe has the voice of an angel." Nef's lips twitch and I let out a fake exasperated sigh.

"That's so cliché," I say as I pinch the bridge of my nose and shake my head in jest.

"You still love me." Nef blows me a kiss and I catch it as they climb back on stage.

"Of course."

Which causes Van to bristle beside me. I nudge him with my shoulder and hold out my hand as I take my seat. He looks at it, then me, then takes my offering and settles beside me. His tail wraps around my waist, pulling me closer. I don't mind one bit.

I lean in. "I also play cello, and Nef is kind enough to let me keep Henrietta with them since she'd take up a lot of space in my apartment."

"You named your cello?—"

"Dear friends, new and old," Nef starts with a twinkle in their eye. "I welcome you to my beloved arena. Hopefully, you'll enjoy the treat I have for you tonight." Saplings rise up behind them and I suck in a gasp as I applaud with the rest of the audience. Usually Nef utilizes the magic light balls, but to add another element to their show will truly bring everything to life.

Nef's long skirt sways as the wind picks up. I'm not sure if it's their influence or not. Nef's eyes close and I breathe in the fresh outdoors as I do the same.

Van leans in. "Question. Why'd we have to wait until dark?"

"Nef's a tree until the sun goes down. The moment the sun doesn't touch them, they wake up."

"Ah, okay." He settles back and scoots just a smidgen closer while Nef starts a beat knocking on their chest.

The sound is hollow and haunting with the rustling of the saplings behind them. The magic lights sway above the stage, illuminating everything. Nef opens their mouth to let out a deep rumbling of song. It's like the earth bubbles up from them. Sometimes there aren't any words to Nef's music and you have to listen for the story within the sounds. Within the thumps of the bark. Within the sway of Nef's body. I want to close my eyes again, but if I do, I'll miss half the show.

Roots push through the ground of the stage as Nef raises their arms and limbs to the sky. I swear thunder rumbles around us, but I'm sure it's part of the show. The magic balls flicker, mimicking lightning and the saplings howl.

This is one of Nef's best shows since I've started coming and I wiggle in my seat with the biggest grin. I can't take my eyes off the stage as the musical storm makes way for a gentle, soft spring day. Flowers pop up from the ground of the stage, bringing gasps from the audience as Nef's voice changes into something light and airy, still wordless, but happier nonetheless.

I don't know how long the show continues for, but we follow through the four seasons until everything appears to shrivel up and die for winter. The sounds and visuals fade until no one can see Nef on stage anymore and a single flower rises from

the dirt.

I bounce to my feet, dragging Van with me since we're still attached by his tail, but I'm not worried because we're both clapping and hooting so loud Nef starts laughing in the background. I shove my fingers in my mouth and whistle.

"That was amazing!" I shout. It's like the entire show was catered to me and kept my brain engaged. Sometimes I get distracted during a performance, but not tonight. Tonight was breathtaking.

"Nef... wow," Van starts.

"I know!" I keep clapping even as the crowd starts to disperse. When the magic light balls brighten, I spring from my seat and hop on the stage to give Nef a hug. "That was your best show yet!"

Nef swings me around and around until we're both dizzy. Van watches us from the seats. I can't read his expression, but it doesn't seem like jealousy this time.

"Join us, Van!" I plop to the ground and wave my arms and legs in the dirt of the stage as if I'm making a snow angel. It helps pack the dirt back in, though I know Nef will do what needs to be done to make the stage properly useable for next time.

Tenatively Van climbs onto the stage. He's been so sure of himself that his hesitation makes me pause.

"I never knew Hex, or any place, could be like this. Joyful. Happy ." Van looks around and I'm covered in dirt when I pop back to my feet.

"Hex is everything," I say as I take his hand. Every time I do, he calms, and this time isn't any different. "And it's even better because of you." I squeeze his hand and

release him to say my goodbye to Nef.

“I have to work the next few nights, but we’ll be back soon.” I wrap my arms around the wood nymph and they pat my back with their arms and limbs. A yawn escapes me that I try to shake off.

“You need sleep,” Nef laughs as another yawn comes. “See you soon, Gabey.” They rub a limb through my hair, tangling it, yet shaking out all the dirt.

I wave as I lead Van away from the stage.

“Nef seems nice.” There isn’t a hint of jealousy in Van’s voice this time.

“They’re really amazing. We hit it off instantly when we met.”

“I think you hit it off with everyone you meet.” Van laughs and I slightly jab him with my elbow.

“Not everyone. I think your brother hates me or something.”

Van stops in his tracks. “Wick doesn’t hate you. I think the only person, well, people, he hates is whoever is keeping Ethan from him. I wish I knew.” Van sighs and looks to the bright twinkling stars above. “I’d bring that boy back in a heartbeat. Punishment be damned. I’d take out the entire Speller coven if I could just bring Ethan back. But I can’t. They’ve warded every damn Speller house and safe haven in Hex. No demon, crossroads or?—”

I blink back at empty space. He’s gone.

GABE

Van's gone and for some silly reason my heart aches. I rub my chest. "Someone summoned him, that's all. He'll come back. He will." In hopes of that, I rush home, not caring that I trail in dirt when I stomp through my front door. It's midnight according to the microwave clock and I pace. How long do deals usually last? What if he's gone for hours? Days? What if he can't find his way back? What if he needs help?

I pace and pace, chewing on my fingernails waiting and waiting. Twenty minutes go by, then thirty. Forty-five minutes roll around and I plop onto my couch and stare at the door, willing Van to walk through it. Or knock. He'll probably knock because I haven't given him a key. But I left the door unlocked so he can let himself in. I race to my room and tear through my dresser to find the spare key I had made months ago. I should have given it to him the same time I gave him my address, but it slipped my mind.

I clutch the key in my hand as I rush back to the living room, not wanting to miss his arrival. Hours and hours tick by and still no Van. I should be reading my new book, but I can't force myself to read when I'm so anxious about Van. What if he doesn't come back? I try, really I do, to stay awake, but I lose the battle curled up on the couch.

Something rips me from sleep, and I shoot straight up. A rustling coming from my door and hope blooms.

“Anybody home?” Van calls out as the door shuts behind him and I let out a breath.
“Olly olly oxen free.”

“Did you find the apartment okay?” I ask as I rub the sleep from my eyes.

“Yep, no problem. The walking earlier actually helped because I could get a feel for where my crossroads is in relation to everything else. I’m pretty close.”

“Good to know.” I try not to seem too eager when I push to my feet. I take his hand and press the key to his palm. “In case you get summoned and I’m not around.”

A smile tugs at Van’s lips. “Moving things a little fast, aren’t we? Asked me to move in within minutes of meeting. Now a key? I think you’re getting attached.” He winks as he pockets the key.

“I just don’t want you locked out.”

“I can sleep in the garden hammocks if I need to, I guess. But I don’t care for sleeping outside.” He pulls at his shirt. “I have a confession I’m not sure you’re going to like. Or maybe you will.”

I swallow as his eyes drop to my lips.

“I usually sleep naked.” Van tugs off his shirt. His beautiful vee comes into view again and I have to rip my eyes away.

“So do I.”

“I hoped you’d say that,” Van practically purrs as he steps closer.

My heart pounds harder in my chest at his proximity. He smells like chocolate and I

don't want to know why.

“You know what else I like doing naked?” He says as he licks his lips. His hand finds its way under my shirt and my skin sizzles at his touch.

My cock strains in my jeans and I'm close to panting. “What?” I ask dumbly, knowing exactly where this is going. Wanting where this is going.

“Showering.” Van pulls away and lifts his arm. “I showered earlier, but after that summons, I need another. You don't mind, do you?” He grins at me, and I'm sure I give him the most ridiculous look.

My mouth falls open, and he cackles. Actually cackles .

“Oh, angel, you're even beautiful when you're flustered.” He cups my cheek and leans in. “I really want to get naked with you and get dirty in fun ways.”

“Yes. That. ”

Something flashes in his eyes as if he didn't think I'd agree. I grab his sweatpants by the waistband and pull him closer. Well, attempt to. The pants have a lot of give and he kind of just stays where he's at while laughing.

“Angel, darling, sweetheart, honey, baby doll,” he says each silly nickname so lovingly. “Are you sure? Once you have fun with a demon, you don't go back. Just ask Lark.”

I grab his hand and yank him towards me. “If you don't kiss me, I might combust. You keep?—”

Van leans in and brushes the softest kiss to my lips before contently sighing and

deepening the kiss with me. I've had a few serious relationships in my life, but no one's ever kissed me like Van. Like I'm the only person in the room. Like I'm the only one that matters. I wish I could bottle up this kiss and save it forever. This kiss is everything I've never had before and Van's still a stranger. What can a kiss with him be like when we know each other?

My hands thread into his silky hair. It's inky black with a soft hint of curl. I haven't known him that long and I already want to get naked with him. Just think of it like a hook up. But... I don't do hook ups. Well, haven't. Maybe I can?

I pull away. "Yes, to the sex lessons. But not tonight. Maybe not tomorrow. We'll have to play it by ear."

"I'll take it."

I grab a horn and pull him to me, crashing my lips to his again. "No more talking."

He yanks at my shirt while I pull at the drawstring of the sweatpants hanging off his hips. He's already tenting the pants with what I'm going to assume is a massive cock. A cock I just agreed to top me. I swallow back any fear I might have because we're not doing anything like that tonight.

"Wait."

Van backs off immediately. We're both panting.

"I haven't had sex in a while. I'm not going to last," I confess.

"I thought you kept busy."

I shake my head. "Lied. Sorry."

His tail whips around my waist as he says, “Naughty Gabe. No more lying.” My jeans fall off my hips when his tail nudges them.

“None. Promise. I was insecure, and you were being all sexy and?—”

His tail presses to my lips. “How long is a while?”

“Couple years?”

“Can’t relate.”

I can’t help but laugh when his teasing smile comes back.

“What else can you do with that tail?” I ask.

There’s a wicked gleam in Van’s eyes when he drops to his knees and tugs my jeans the rest of the way down. Before he can get them off me, he tugs my shoes from my feet and tosses them toward the door. I’m standing in my boxer briefs with my cock poking out the waistband while he’s still in the pair of sweatpants.

“You’re such a treat. I don’t want my tail to have all the fun. We’ll save him for later. ‘Kay?”

All I can do is moan when his tongue licks at my cock head. He yanks my boxers down my thighs and I grab for his horns to keep steady. Anything to keep on my feet.

Why is it so sexy to have a demon kneeling in front of me?

“Mmmm, even your cock tastes sweet.” He licks the underside of my dick while his tail wraps around my thigh, squeezing, bringing in another element to the sensations. His tongue swirls as he takes me in. One hand cups my balls and massages. I’m not

enormous, but I've been told I have a great cock and the way Van moans around me makes me believe it. No one's ever been so enthusiastic before.

I pull Van back up by the horns, and he moans at the action.

"What's wrong?" He kisses me over and over as he keeps stroking.

"Nothing. Fuck." I buck into his offering, unable to stop myself. "I. Want. Suck." I moan into the crook of his neck. It really has been so damn long since someone besides my own hands have touched my flesh. "Let me suck you off. Please."

Van pouts. "But I was enjoying myself worshipping my angel."

"There is the whole sixty-nine position. We both get what we want." I wiggle my brows and he pulls off the sweatpants so fast I stumble back a bit. "Fuck." He's huge. Probably in proportion with being a demon, but still. I've never seen a cock so big in person, only in porn. I've also never seen a blue cock in anything other than porn, but here we are. The crown is a bit purple and my brain goes offline with the thoughts of watching the beast pound my ass some day.

"Sure you wanna take those sex lessons?"

"You won't hurt me." I say the words, knowing they're true.

"Wouldn't dream of it. Your ass can be trained to take me, or my tail." He wiggles it behind him. "Or nothing. It's all your call. But I still say you need to know the wonders of anal with someone that knows what they're doing before you write it off completely."

I nod. It's all I can do. For whatever reason, I trust everything Van says. Maybe I'm delusional, but right now my brain is sucked into a lust haze and all I want is his cock

in my mouth.

“I can deep throat like a beast,” I say as I grab his hand and pull him toward my bedroom.

“Holy. Wow.” Van’s fingertips graze my back. “So that’s how you did it, isn’t it? Hid away all your magic.” I let him examine the tattoo that graces my back. It’s two massive black feathered wings, mine in miniature form, with a binding spell woven between them like a corset tie.

“How does it work?” His fingers tap the pink bow at the bottom of the wings.

“I chant the unbinding words.”

“Why did you do this to yourself? How? Where? This is old.” He leans in and sniffs me. “Really old magic.”

I chew at my lips, trying to figure out how to tell this part of my story. I’ve never had to before. No one knew what I was or the true reason for the tattoo. “I met my mother when they sprouted at sixteen. She did it and I do not recommend. She used a needle made from one of my feathers and ink from my blood. She said everyone would be safer if I couldn’t access my powers yet. The unbinding magic wouldn’t work until I was at least twenty, though I tried over and over.”

“Do you ever want to get rid of the spell? Access all of your magic?”

My heart pounds. How did we get to this? I shake my head. “I don’t know. What I do know is I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“Got it.”

I'm pressed against the doorjamb of my room and Van's lips are on mine again.

His hands are in my hair, pulling, and I love it. His hard cock presses against my stomach. He's so strong and I want to climb him. So I do, wrapping my arms around his neck and hoisting myself up. My legs go around his waist, trapping his cock between us. His hands go under my ass, supporting me as I squirm for more friction.

"You're so needy."

"You have no idea." I moan when his tail wraps around our cocks as he walks us to the bed.

His blunt nails tickle my side once he has us on the mattress. "I want to just keep kissing you. Breathe in your little moans. Play your body with my touch."

He straddles me, thrusting his hardness against mine while his tail captures my wrists and holds them above my head, taking away all my control.

"Don't stop. Don't ever stop." My hips move of their own accord. Eyes shutter closed and I just feel everything Van does. His hands move down my body and he slides off me to take my cock in his mouth again. "No fair, but don't care anymore."

"Your pretty little moans could make me come."

Just to tease him I moan, but the joke's on me because he does something delightful with his hands and my balls and I squirm, wanting to taste him too.

He releases my wrists, only to press his tail to my mouth. "How about this, angel? Show me how much you like sucking cock."

I caress his tail before licking at the end. I don't know what I expected it to taste like,

but it's just like skin, washed skin, like maybe he cleaned up after his summoning, and I didn't know. I use my hands to direct his tailcock and take the entire end in my mouth. It's spongy like a cock head and Van moans around me. I damn near blow my load because of it, but push on.

I lick and slurp, mimicking what Van's doing to my own dick.

"Not gonna last," I pant out. My balls draw up and my orgasm builds, but he pulls away and kisses the length of me before going back to the delectable sucking.

"Come for me, Gabe. Don't hold back." Van's tail seems to thicken between my lips and I continue to follow his lead. His hand jerks himself and I want it to be mine, but I don't say anything. Next time. I'll taste him next time.

"Fuck. Coming. Fuck." Van curses and his mouth falls away from my cock just as I cry out. My orgasm blows through me, shooting cum across Van's face. And why the fuck is the surprise facial so hot to me? "Didn't mean to come first, babes, but you're just so hot." He rubs his finger through a rope of cum and pushes it into his mouth. "And so damn delicious."

Fuck. I drop back on the bed and stare at the ceiling while my breathing calms. Van leaves momentarily, probably to clean his face, then the bed moves beside me as he joins me. He buries his nose in the crook of my neck and I curl into him. Warm. No, hot. So so damn hot, but it doesn't bother me.

"You okay, Gabe?" Van's tail pokes me gently in the stomach a few times and I grin.

"You kinda just blew my mind. I've never sucked a tail before. And that mouth of yours..." Fuck.

"I'm basically a god in bed." Van nuzzles closer and throws his leg over mine.

“I believe it.” A yawn escapes and I can barely keep my eyes open. We’re cuddled together. There’s no use trying to come up with other sleeping arrangements, so I don’t bother bringing it up.

“For the first time in a long time, my brain is calm,” Van says.

“I don’t have some magical calming cum.” At least not that I know of.

Van laughs into my neck. “It’s not your cum. It’s you. Something about you calms the beast inside. I felt it earlier and I feel it now. Maybe it’s fate. The veil opened and sent me right to exactly who I need to help me.”

“Maybe,” I whisper. “That’s what the cards said, too.”

“It is.”

“But no more thinking, it’s time for sleeps.” I yawn again and wiggle, just to make sure I’m comfortable. I haven’t been this comfortable in years.

10

VAN

How is someone so adorable even in sleep? How, I ask? How? Gabe scrunches his nose and I have to bite back a laugh because it's just so fucking cute.

"No, I don't want cabbage soup. It gives me gas," he says matter-of-factly with his eyes closed and now I know what the scrunched nose was for. Sweet Gabe talks in his sleep. "Yes. I love cabbage soup, but I don't want to have... issues in front of my date."

I wait to see if he continues this conversation and am not disappointed.

"Chicken noodle soup? I don't know. Maybe I'll just make..."

This time I can't help it and laugh a little too loud.

"Mmmm?" Gabe asks as his eyes flutter open. "Are you okay?" He lifts his head as if to get up and I pull him back down.

"Did you know you talk in your sleep?"

"Yes." He groans and flops to his back. "How embarrassing." He covers his face with his hands. "What did I say?"

"Oh, apparently cabbage soup gives you gas."

“No.”

“Yes.” I rub his rumbling stomach. “Maybe you need cabbage soup right now. You’re hungry.”

“No cabbage soup. Takes too long.” He rolls out of bed. “What time is it?”

Sun peeks out from the bottom of the light blocking curtains over the windows. “Dunno, but daylight.”

“Lets grab something to eat. I have a whole carton of eggs. Do you like eggs?” He pauses and looks down at himself and frowns. “I’m filthy.” The barest hint of a smile graces his lips before he shrugs and leaves me alone in the room. He’s beautifully filthy, with dirt from the stage and sweat from our fucking. Probably sweat from sleeping with a demon who runs hot like a dragon.

I push to my feet and assess myself, refusing to see how many hours are left on the countdown device. The skin around said device seems less angry than before, so that’s a good sign. No more fresh blood, anyway. I probably shouldn’t have pushed myself last night, but Gabe is temptation on a pair of beautiful legs, and those fucking thighs. Not to mention his ass. But I think it’s his sweetness I’m drawn to the most. He hasn’t judged me from the moment he met me, even knowing all the stories told about me. I’ve never met anyone quite like Gabe before and I have a feeling I never will again. I’ll do anything I can to keep on his good side.

I don’t want to rummage through his dresser without permission, so I leave the bedroom stark naked. Only to find Gabe fake singing into a spatula, also completely naked and dirt streaked at the stove.

He shakes his ass to some unheard music. “You never answered about the eggs. I’m scrambling half the carton.”

I grab a few more eggs, crack them open one by one, and toss them into the skillet.
“Might need a few more.”

His mouth opens into an O as he starts frantically scrambling the new eggs in with the others.

“Also.” I press against his back and breathe him in. “I love eggs. What about toast?”

He waves to a bag of bread by the fridge, no doubt the remains from the sandwiches he made me. I find the toaster and get a round going while he works the eggs.

“Do you like cheese in your eggs?” Gabe asks as he shakes a bag of shredded cheddar at me.

“Best way to eat them, if you ask me.”

“Exactly.” He upends the entire bag over the eggs and starts scrambling some more.

“Plates?” I ask as I butter the first batch of toast.

“Cabinet.” He’s concentrating so hard on the eggs he jumps when I touch his shoulder.

“Something wrong?” I ask.

Gabe sucks in a breath. “What? No. If I don’t watch them, they’ll burn. I get too impatient and cook them on high heat.” He stabs and scoops them with the spatula.

I look over his shoulder. “They look done.”

“They are. But I like them done done.” He stabs them again. “ Super done.”

“Same. No one gets it. And not burned. Ew. Just super done and you have to do it just right with?—”

“A hint, just a tiny hint, of vitamin D milk.”

“Exactly!” I hand him a pair of plates as he turns off the heat.

“No one ever gets it!” Gabe scoops the eggs equally into the plates and sets them on the table.

“Are we gonna eat naked?” I ask.

“Yep.” He grabs two spoons and hands me one, no doubt daring me to ask for a fork. Scrambled eggs are spoon food as far as I’m concerned.

“Sounds good to me. I like being naked.” I scoop some eggs onto a slice of toast.

“We probably should have put towels down, though.” Gabe says with a mouth full of breakfast. “I’ll just remember to wipe them down later.” A bit of egg falls out of his mouth and for some reason I find it endearing. Pretty little Gabe is a messy eater.

“So, what do you wanna do today?” I ask.

“I have work tonight, and I’ll probably need to take a short nap later.” He looks to the microwave that says it’s nine am. “I have the late shift today so I’ll be out until at least three am.”

“Can I come with you?” I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Of course. I don’t think Pike would ever ban you from coming. You’re his best friend.”

“He still says that?”

“Yep.” Another shovel of food before he speaks again. “He really missed you. And fuck these eggs are so good. Thanks for making the toast. It’s perfectly toasted.”

I snort into a spoon of eggs. “Don’t make fun.”

“I’m not. I’m picky about my toast. There’s a fine fine balance to get it perfect. And this—” He lifts his half-eaten piece. “Is perfect.”

“I’m happy to be of service.” I tip my head. He’s so easy to talk to and I don’t feel like an idiot. That’s so damn rare these days. “Speaking of. When would you like to start magic lessons?”

“You were serious?”

“Deadly serious. I hate the idea of you learning magic from humans.”

“The witches that run Hex are all human,” he says, and uses his piece of toast to point at me.

“Yes, but a born witch human is completely different than learning from randos on the internet. You have to realize that.”

“I do.” Gabe grins, and that halo’s back. “I’m just being silly. Of course, I’d rather have magic lessons with a sexy demon. But it’s going to be hard to break old habits.” He nods his head solemnly.

“I’m sure I can instill some good habits into you. Maybe use fun incentives.”

“I do like incentives.” Gabe licks his butter slick lips and my cock perks right up. “I

would like to read a bit today, though. I got a new book at The Magic Shop I still haven't gotten to look at. So, I want to take some time to read before heading to work."

"What's the book about?" I search my memory for the last book I read and come up blank.

"How to be a nephilim. There's probably magic inside too, so it could go hand in hand with your lessons." He reaches for the book, but frowns before picking it up. "Should probably wash my hands again first."

We wash up the dishes when we're done eating, and he shoos me off to shower. I clean up quickly so I don't take up all the rest of his hot water, then slip into fresh clothes.

I'm putting away the now dry dishes when he joins me in the kitchen dressed in a pair of dark wash skinny jeans and a black t-shirt.

I lean against the counter and watch him pick up the book and flip through it.

"I should probably do your laundry," I say.

"If you want, I won't stop you. But you don't have to."

"You want to read." I wave at the book. "And if I'm here, I'll get rowdy wanting to make out or something so this way you can have peace and clean clothes."

"And people call you selfish. I don't think they know you at all." Gabe snaps the book closed and looks up at me. I get lost in those brown eyes of his.

"They know me. I just think you're cute and want to stay on your good side."

He sticks his tongue out and scrunches his face at the same time. “There’s more to it than that, but I’ll let you get away with it for now.”

I want to run my hands through his wet hair and pull him in for a kiss, but I never should have kissed him last night. We never should have?—

“Stop that.” Gabe says. “What ever’s going on with your face, you’re thinking too much.”

“Thinking about that dreamy cabbage soup,” I lie, just to see him crack a smile.

He snorts as he waves his book at me. “With your permission?—”

“It’s your apartment. I’m just freeloading.”

Another snort. “You’re not freeloading. You’re doing chores, paying for some food, and helping out.”

“It’s not enough for your generosity.”

“You did also suck the life out of me from my dick last night. So...” There’s a playful sparkle in his eyes. He plops into the couch and spreads out. “Anyway, I’m gonna read for a bit. The laundromat is behind the building. My laundry card is in my wallet on my dresser.” He waves towards his bedroom as he cracks open the book again, eyes already glued to the pages. “But you don’t have to do anything. You need to rest, too.”

His words make me pause. You need rest, too. No one has ever said anything like that to me. I’ve always been required to keep going. Keep doing. Never rest. I can’t rest. Not right now, but I won’t tell him that.

“I want to do this.” I leave him to grab the hamper from the bathroom and snatch his laundry card. “I’ll be back.”

“I’ll miss you.”

Is it too wild to wish that it’s true?

GABE

I already miss Van the second he leaves my apartment with my clothes. He's a bright light and takes up so much space in my place. Not physical space. Okay, yes, physical space, but he has lots of energy to feel through. There's a lot of trauma in his life and a lot of disappointment, self-loathing. I can't exactly read his thoughts, but I can read him. The stories everyone tells are just surface Van, what they can see. But even in the time I've spent with him, I know there's more to him than his anger. More than his temper and his so-called selfishness. He's thoughtful with his decisions. He comes across as brash, but that just adds to his charm. He wants to be loved so badly, but pushes everyone away with his attitude. I can't imagine what that kind of life is like. I had my dad and my grandma. Most of my relationships haven't worked out, but if I think about them, I can admit I checked out of almost all of them out of boredom. Will I get bored with Van? I don't know, but I never plan on getting bored.

He's been gone for ten minutes before I actually try to focus on reading.

The book's empty every time I try. My shoulders drop and I sigh, letting the book fall into my lap. Perhaps the only way I can read it is if I have a feather. How inconvenient.

My wings are a hassle and I can't possibly have them out in the apartment because they take up too much room. But if I need a feather to unlock the information?—

The entire building shakes when something slams into it from behind. I scramble to

my feet and stare at the back wall, only for the building to shake again. What the heck?

I slide on a pair of shoes. Someone could be hurt. The humidity steals my breath the moment I step outside my door. What good did showering do since I'm already sweating? Grunts and curses reach my ears before I find myself in front of Van and Domhnall fighting. Van laughs as he pushes away from the brick of my apartment building.

"What's going on?" I call out just as Domhnall takes another swing at Van.

"Friendly disagreement," Van says as he punches Domhnall in the stomach. He grimaces and shakes out his hand, but Domhnall sends him flying back again.

"You can't fight here," I say. "I'd rather not get kicked out of my apartment because my guest destroyed the building."

Van stops and looks at me. His mouth falls open, but Domhnall takes the opportunity to throw another punch.

"That was low," I say to the gargoyle.

"He had it coming. This fucker?—"

I hold a hand. "Like I said, you can't fight here."

"I'll fight wherever the fuck I want to fight." Domhnall grabs Van by the tail, causing Van to yelp.

"You're always getting into fights with Van and Wick. What's your problem with them?" I drop my fists to my hips and wait for Domhnall's response.

Van makes kissy faces at him. “Awe, I think he’s in love with us both and he doesn’t know how to show his affection.”

I swear Domhnall turns to living stone right there as he charges Van.

I gather my magic into my core. It’s not wise to do this with such short notice, but I need something showy to stop the two from destroying the building or themselves. “Oh, come on!” I stomp a foot, sending all my magic into the action to make the ground rumble and shake around us. I get the desired effect and they both stop in their tracks and blink back at me. “Will you please either make up or go someplace else? I’m trying to read.” My head feels floaty, and it takes everything in me to keep my balance.

“You—you...” Domhnall stares open-mouthed. “I didn’t know nephilims could...”

“I’m sure you know nothing about nephilims and what we can do, so I’d stay on my good side if I were you.” I turn on my heel and leave the pair to finish whatever their problem is. It’s none of my business and I’ve done what I can. All I can hope is there’s no real damage to the building. Or to Van.

My hands tremble when I try to open the door of my apartment. Why does the thought of Van getting hurt terrify me so much? We haven’t known each other very long. Why am I so attached already?

“Hey!” Van jogs up behind me while I’m staring at my front door. “Thanks for that. But...” He scratches the back of his head. “It’s my fault. We were in the laundry room and he started talking about Wick and I lost it.”

“I get it, but just don’t destroy buildings.” The door finally opens and I push inside into the blessed cool air. “So hot out there.” I wheeze and my knees buckle. Shit. Shit. Shit.

Van catches me in his big strong arms. The fear in his eyes is the last thing I see before I pass out.

12

VAN

“What do I do?” I say to no one since Gabe is passed out in my arms. He’s overly hot, and that’s me saying it. I rush him to his bedroom and strip him of his shoes and clothes, leaving him in his underwear. “What do I do?” His hair’s a black mess around his head and he looks peaceful. But why the fuck did he pass out on me?

I race to the bathroom and start a bath of room temperature water, that should help. Hopefully. But by the time I get back to his room, Gabe’s sitting on his bed with his knees pulled to his chest.

“Sorry,” he whispers as he rocks back and forth. “Over did it too fast.” He groans before pressing a hand to his mouth and rushing to the bathroom.

I follow and hold his hair back as he vomits into the toilet. “What’s wrong? What’s wrong? Tell me.” I run a hand down his back as he settles on the floor.

“I’m a dummy and shouldn’t have used that much magic with no preparation.” He pushes up to spit into the toilet.

He hadn’t used much magic at all, but I don’t tell him. “That’s why we need to teach you proper magic skills. What you did shouldn’t have done...” I wave a hand over him. “Shouldn’t have made you pass out or made you sick.”

HellFire why was I so scared he’d hurt himself more?

He just nods and lays back down. I'd forgotten the bath and turn off the faucet.

"I think the floor has claimed me as its own. I'm its brother now." Gabe gestures towards the door.

The snort comes without permission, but Gabe cracks a smile with his eyes closed.

"I'm gonna be down for a bit. But I should be okay to go into work tonight."

"Fuck no. Gabe, you need rest after a magical blowout. You're not going in tonight." I'll fight Pike if I have to, just to make sure Gabe gets the rest he needs.

"No, I have to go in. Sparkle needed tonight off and I switched with him because no one else could. I can't?—"

I already have Pike on speed dial, and he picks up on the second ring.

"You're on speaker phone, P. I have Gabe sick here after a magical blowout because of me."

"Shit. What'd you do this time?" Pike asks and I grind my teeth.

"It wasn't his fault," Gabe says from the floor. "I chose to use magic unprepared and?—"

"He fucking passed out and now he's throwing up his guts in the toilet. He needs tonight off."

"No! I'll be fine. Please?—"

"Gabe—" I say.

“I promise I’ll be fine before my shift. I can’t let Sparkle down.” Gabe grips the toilet bowl. “Please. I’m not sick sick, I’ll be fine.”

Pike sighs on the other end. “Okay, but if you start to go downhill, I’m sending your ass back home. Got it?”

Gabe nods before he remembers Pike can’t see him. “Thank you.” He slumps against the counter and glares at me as I hang up and pocket my phone.

I squat to meet him at eye-level. “If you’re going to be stubborn, I’m taking care of you. What do you need?”

Gabe sighs. “A cup of water to rinse out my mouth and time. It never lasts more than a few hours.” He groans and pushes back to his knees to vomit again.

I can’t leave him like this and rummage through the mirrored cabinet to find a hair elastic to tie back his hair when he’s done heaving out the contents of his stomach this round.

Tears trail down his eyes when he leans against the wall, no doubt from the effort of throwing up. “Sorry. I hate you seeing me like this.”

“No. It’s my fault. If I hadn’t?—”

Gabe lifts a hand to stop me. “It’s not your fault. It was my unwise decision to use magic when I wasn’t properly prepared to.”

“Everyone always blames me for everything.” My shoulders drop and I slide down the wall to join him.

“I won’t.” Gabe leans his head on my shoulder and sighs.

“I’m just used to it.” I press a kiss to his temple when I slide him off me so I can grab him a cup of water.

I don’t know why I kissed him, but it felt right. He feels right when he’s next to me. Keeps me calm, like my brain isn’t running a thousand miles in a second.

When I reach the kitchen, I rummage through the cabinets for the cups. The cup I grab has a cute deer drawing and I take it with me back to the bathroom where Gabe is again in the toilet. I fill the cup with tap water and leave him to find the washrags. He really shouldn’t go into work like this, but I’m going to trust him to know himself. I rinse the washrag with cool water and dab at his forehead and neck while he slowly drinks down the water.

“Thanks,” he says weakly when he sets his cup on the floor.

“Are you sure you should go in tonight?”

He nods as he shuts his eyes and leans his head back. “Won’t take long to feel better. Promise.”

We sit like this, with me filling up his cup every twenty minutes or so, for about an hour and a half before he finally starts to feel better.. He doesn’t talk much and I don’t blame him. His throat is probably raw from throwing up. Not to mention how achy his stomach muscles must be.

“Do you need pain meds?” I ask.

Gabe shakes his head. “They don’t work on me, not since the wings.” He rubs against the wall as if to scratch his back. “I feel better, though. A lot better. I think the worse of it has passed.” He reaches to put the cup on the countertop.

I help him to his feet, and he looks down, probably realizing he's only in a pair of boxer briefs. They're pink with white hearts and they're so damn cute on him. The smallest smile lifts his lips when his eyes meet mine. His hair is a tangled mess. He's got dark circles under his eyes, and tear tracks down his cheeks. His nose is runny. He looks like a complete wreck, but nothing can mar his beauty. He's got it in spades, inside and out.

"Thanks for helping me feel better." He squeezes my hand, and I want to melt. Want to be a better person. Want to worship at his feet. No one's ever looked at me the way he does. No one. And I know in my heart he doesn't need me. He's strong. He's better than I'll ever be. "Van?" Concern wrinkles his brows. "What's wrong?"

I bring his hand to my lips and kiss his knuckles. "Nothing. Just glad you're feeling better. You should take a nap."

"I think you're right." As if just mentioning sleep makes him more tired, he yawns.

I tuck him into bed and turn off the light. Leaving him takes so much effort, but I can't loom over him if he's going to sleep.

The living room seems like a safe place to stay out of his way before I remember I left all of Gabe's clothes at the laundromat. I race to the little building to find someone had finished his laundry and folded it neatly in his hamper. I don't know who to thank for it, but I'm grateful nonetheless. I trek back to his apartment and leave the hamper in the living room, so I don't bother him.

"What to do." I look around. I'm not sure how to help with his plants, and I figured it's safer to not do anything than accidentally hurt them. The book he'd been reading lays forgotten on the couch. Perhaps he wouldn't mind me learning a bit about nephilims myself.

I settle into the plush couch and crack open the book. But when I do, it's empty. "What the hell?" I huff and turn a few pages. "Are you one of those annoying special books?"

A blue dot appears on the center of the page and fans out, bleeding everywhere until it fades back into the page to reveal words.

So You're An Asshole And Want To Reform.

"Har har har. Hilarious," I mumble. I've been an asshole out of necessity. Asserting myself means I'm not weak. I can't show weakness or I'll get hurt. I don't want to hurt. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

Learning How To Live A Gentler Life.

"That sounds better." My eyes flutter across the page as I read. "None of this sounds appealing," I say after a few paragraphs.

Patience Is A Virtue.

"And I'm a fucking demon." I snap the book closed. "Definitely a bad idea."

The previously blank cover reads: You Can't Blame Everything On You Being A Demon 101.

"Now you're just trying to piss me off." I push to my feet and pace. "What do you know? You're a book!"

Created To Help Fools Discover Themselves.

"Gabe isn't a fool."

No. But You Are.

“Oh, be quiet.” I slump into the recliner opposite the couch and stare at the book.
“What do you know about anything?”

Too Much.

I scratch at my jaw. Why the fuck am I arguing with a book of all things?

You Don't Need Me. But Gabe Does Unless You Know Anything About Being A Nephilim?

“I do not.”

Then Let Him Lead You On Your Path To Bettering Yourself. He'll Be Better Than Me.

I nod. “You're probably right.” I know the book's right. Gabe is kind and if I just pay attention, I know it'll rub off on me. “Sorry for being a dick. You're probably a good book.”

I'm Good For Whoever Needs Me And You Do Not.

Rejected by books and nearly everyone else because of my attitude. But not by Gabe.

Do Not Get Melancholy. Shoulders Back. You Are A Demon.

“Damn right I am.”

I'm staring at the ceiling when Gabe comes out, rubbing his eyes. “Are you okay?”
He asks.

“Contemplating life.”

He sits next to me. “It’s all complicated some days, isn’t it?” His fingers thread into mine and he squeezes.

“It really is.” More complicated since Gabe came into my life because he shakes everything up. “Are you feeling better?” I bump him softly with my shoulder.

“Yep, good as new. I just need a little bit of something in my stomach and I’ll be even better.” He puffs out his chest and smiles so damn brightly I believe him.

“Go wash off the afternoon and I’ll make something from your fridge.” I can be good for Gabe. Take care of him. Just knowing him makes me want to be a better person. Doesn’t hurt that we’ve had bedroom relations.

“Sounds good. Just a sandwich, maybe?” Gabe pushes to his feet, and I head to the kitchen to investigate what he has.

It’s not much and I decide I need to figure out the food situation for him so he doesn’t have to. I make matching sandwiches from that first night, figuring he must like the kind of sandwich he gave me.

When Gabe joins me in the kitchen, he finally looks bright eyed and fresh faced as if the afternoon never happened. He’s even humming a happy little tune and talks to all his plants before he makes his way to the table.

“I haven’t talked to them today.” He grins, probably knowing I want to make some kind of silly remark about talking to plants. But... his plants make him so happy and I never want to be the one to steal the light from his eyes. I’d rather fall on a knife.

“Would you teach me about your plants? How to take care of them, what their names

are? Everything?”

His mouth drops open mid-bite. “Really?” he whispers?

“Yeah, I want to help if I can.”

He drops the sandwich and pushes to his feet and walks over to the plastic gazebo.

“These three?—”

“Gabe, you have to eat first and get ready for work. Your babies can be a project for me this week. But right now, food.” As I finish my words, his stomach growls and his face goes red.

“You’re right. I just got so excited because no one ever wants to learn about my babies.”

“Well, I do.”

He settles back at the table, and we eat in relative silence. As silent as we can with him humming to himself and bouncing in his chair. He’s so happy and I did that. Me .

“Do you still wanna come to work with me?” Gabe wipes his mouth and watches me.

“Absolutely. I wanna see you in action, angel.”

He snorts. “It’s not that interesting.”

“It’ll be interesting for me. How long have you worked for Pike?”

“Only about six months. I got into Hex, got my living permit, and started looking for a job immediately. Flutter and Fangs had an opening. I interviewed with Ava and

Pike and voilà, here I am.”

“Why’d you move to Hex in the first place?” I can venture a guess.

He nibbles on his nails. “Dad died. I didn’t handle it well and couldn’t contain my magic. It kept going haywire in public. It was bad. Really bad. Mom came to me one night with the address to Hex. I sold almost all of my things, booked the flights from San Francisco, and I’ve been here ever since.”

What can I say to that? I’ve never been close to my parents, never knew who my father is. And my mother forced me into a parental roll at seven. I would not mourn at losing her. Not one bit.

I rub at my chest, forgetting about the count down device. What would it be like having a parent I’d mourn the loss of?

“But let’s not dwell on sad shit.” Gabe grabs both our plates and gives them a quick wash in the sink. “Dad had a good life, and he gave me a good life.”

“What did you do in San Francisco?” I want to know everything about him.

He cracks a smile. “I edited porn.”

I choke on my drink. “What?” Never would have?—

“I’m joking! Just wanted to see your reaction. I was a software developer.”

“You got me.” I snort. “Do you miss it? Going from software developing to bartender is a major change.”

“Nope, not one bit. Hex has been everything I’ve wanted in a hometown. I never

want to venture out into the human world and their jobs ever again. I don't have to work on complex problems. I don't have to worry about if I'll make rent or anything. It's bliss." He says it all as if Hex really is a dream come true for him and I'm starting to believe it is. His eyes flint to the microwave clock. "Okay, I gotta finish getting ready." And he leaves me for his bedroom again.

13

GABE

Pike cat calls from the bar as soon as Van and I walk through the door of Flutter and Fangs. My cheeks blaze hot when he whistles and Lark just shakes his head at his partner.

“There are bets on whether you two fucked,” Warwick says from his usual spot at the counter.

Van wraps an arm and his tail around my waist. “I’d never fuck and tell, and certainly not with sweet angels.”

“He told you what he is, then?” Pike laughs. “Took an entire two months before he trusted us.”

My cheeks burn hotter. “I didn’t know if I could trust you yet or not. I was still getting a feel for the place and Hex.”

“And now you love it,” Lark says as he hops off the countertop. He’s in his signature sparkly booty shorts. This pair is bright orange. Pike likes seeing his ass on display, and so does everyone else.

Van growls behind me and pulls me closer. “What do you say about changing your uniform to a pair of those?”

“Nope. Not happening.” I shake my head so hard I almost trip over my own feet. I’m just not comfortable with everyone seeing so much of me in public.

“Booty shorts aren’t for everyone.” Lark shakes his ass and I think we’re all mesmerized by it.

“Close your mouths boys, Lark is mine,” Pike says as he pulls him in for a kiss. They’re so sweet together and I still ache for something like that. Where someone cherishes me and I cherish them.

Warwick huffs and throws back a shot of HellFire. There’s a yip from the couch and Frankie charges towards us.

“Awe, girl. I missed you, too.” Van drops to his knees and takes all the slobbering, flaming kisses the Hellhound gives him. Despite his magic being gone, her lava like saliva doesn’t affect him.

When she’s done with him, Frankie makes her way to me and boops me a few times with her nose as she extinguishes the flames from her ears so I can pet her head. “Sweet Frankie. Are you having a good day?” I ask and she boops me a few more times. We discovered months ago I can’t handle her saliva. At least not yet. I have to wonder if I broke the magic sealing away my wings and my full abilities if she wouldn’t affect me. “Okay, I gotta get ready for my shift. But I’ll come play with you when I can.”

She yips and barks before running in circles and dashing back to her favored couch to chew on her toy again.

Pike laughs. “She knows your schedule and gets sad when you’re not here.”

“I miss her, too.” I wrap my half apron around my waist and start with my prep. I

haven't been to work since Van fell into my life and I'm anxious to get back to it.

"You charm every person and creature you meet, don't you?" Van asks. He takes me in as if he's never seen me before.

"Everyone deserves kindness, and that's how I strive to live." I slice into the first lime of the night with him watching my every move.

Warwick slams back another shot of HellFire, and Van sighs.

"How much have you had to drink already?" he asks his brother.

"None of your business."

"I just." Van wipes at his face. "I wish I could help you. I wish I could snatch Ethan back from his family for you, but he's unobtainable."

Wick pounds his fist on the countertop. "Don't you think I know that? I try everything I can find just to get a glimpse of him, and yet every effort is thwarted by his bitch of a grandmother. Everyone says Cordia's the best thing for Hex since the founding leaders, but they don't know what she does for power. It's almost as bad as Drake tethering Lark's soul to him."

We all tense and Lark lets out a small chuckle as he waves his hand around. "And Pike freed me from the soul tether. I'm sure one day you'll find your Ethan and live happily ever after."

"Exactly," I say. "If there's anything you think I can help with, let me know." I reach out to squeeze Warwick's hand before remembering I'm covered in lime juice now. "Anything."

Wick gives me a lopsided grin, then looks at his brother with a scowl. “Do not hurt this man like you do all the others.” My heart aches. What happened to the others?

Van growls. “ I don’t hurt them. They’ve all been one-night stands, or several night stands and don’t understand leaving me alone afterwards.”

I go back to my limes. Van’s different with me, I just know it. He wants to be a better person and I can help him. I think so anyway.

Wick rolls his eyes. “Sure, tell yourself that, Van. Yev was at my place for days after you rejected him.”

“Yev? I have no idea who the fuck Yev is.”

“Exactly!” Wick shouts. “You can’t keep treating people like they’re disposable.”

“I don’t treat people like that.” Van’s tail rattle snakes behind him and I’m surprised he doesn’t stomp his foot.

“Wick,” Pike says, getting the demon’s attention. “I think you’ve had enough HellFire for now. Go sit with Frankie and sober up before you start saying things you’ll regret.”

“I haven’t said anything I’ll regret.” Wick slides off his chair and sulks over to Frankie, who barks a happy little bark and pounces into his lap.

Van stands staring after his brother, fists clenched. “I don’t treat people like that. I don’t.”

“Van,” Pike says his name as if to contradict Van’s words.

“I don’t mean to.” Van turns. “I’ll see you at the end of your shift, Gabe. If that’s okay?”

“You don’t have to leave,” I say.

“I do. I need to.” Van runs a hand down his face. “Or I might start a fight.”

“Whatever you need to do.”

Van nods and leaves the bar.

“Damn,” Pike says as he drops a hand to my shoulder. “Before he would have stayed just to find someone to fuck in the bathroom, then start a fight with. What have you done to my best friend?” He chuckles and squeezes my shoulder.

“Not me. He’s a great guy. I just think people don’t understand him.” I start on another lime and keep my eyes on the job, not wanting to meet anyone’s eyes.

Pike laughs so loud everyone looks at him. “No one understands Van. Not even me and I’ve known him the longest.”

“Have you tried?”

That makes him clamp his mouth shut. Lark flushes and looks away from me.

Pike fills a shot glass with HellFire and drinks it. “I love Van and Wick like they’re my own siblings. But neither of them make sense to me.”

Lark lays a hand on Pike’s forearm before making eye contact with me. “I understand where their anger comes from, but the way they act out is still foreign to me. I was taught poise and etiquette as a courtesan-in-training. How to not let my anger fuel me

like it does the demons. But I wish I had allowed myself to throw fits and be angry when I was Drake's captive. Maybe it would have served me better than being pliant. I'll never know. But I do know one thing." He squeezes Pike's arm. "Van saved me from Drake draining my blood and I'll be forever grateful for him."

"As will I." Pike pulls Lark into him and kisses the top of his head. "Van's my best friend and if I knew how to get things through his thick skull, I would. But he never listens to me about anything."

"Perhaps you take the wrong approach." I move on to a few lemons to cut. "I'm working with him and he's doing better." But this afternoon...

"I think you'll be the calming influence he needs," Lark says. "You always help rowdy customers."

Pike chuckles. "Gabe just has to flutter those pretty lashes and the customers fall in line."

"That doesn't work every time," I say with a laugh.

"Ninety-seven percent of the time," Lark says. "I've seen it."

Warwick sulks the entire evening and stares at his phone. His fingers stay in Frankie's short fur. If I didn't know any better, I'd think Wick was content, but it's the little twitches in his tail that give him away.

I half expect Van to stomp back in at some point, but he doesn't. Three am rolls around and the night's been mostly quiet with our usual crowd. If it were a themed night, it'd be different. Everyone loves karaoke or drag night, especially loves the pole dancing nights where Sparkle shines. Sometimes Lark gets back on stage. But it's Kristy, part succubus, part siren, that draws in the biggest crowds. When she's

headlining, the place is packed. Though I'm pretty sure it has something to do with the fact Pike brings in more couches and gets rid of the tables and chairs. Basically, the place turns into an orgy.

I've only worked one orgy and while I'm intrigued, I ask to be off those nights. They affect me in a way I'm not comfortable with in public. I have to wonder if some of my hangups are because I grew up with humans and still have human morals. I can't think too much like a human in Hex, though. While there are humans in Hex, full and half like me, most don't think or act like the humans outside of Hex. What would I be like if I grew up here? Or anyplace like it?

"Gabe?" Lark calls my name as lights go out.

"Sorry! Distracted again." I'd already done my cleaning and take off my apron to shove into the laundry basket behind the counter.

"See you tomorrow night," Pike says as I hurry out the door.

Van's pacing the parking lot and rushes to me the moment he sees me.

"How was your night? Are you okay? Did you get sick at all?" He doesn't let me get a word out before he's pulling me into a hug.

I melt into his big arms, his warm body. His tail wraps around my thigh and I chuckle when we pull apart.

"Sorry, I couldn't stay in there with Wick. I get too upset seeing him like that."

"It's okay." I pat his tail because it's too awkward trying to walk with it claiming me. He loosens, only to wrap around my waist instead. "Did you do anything fun?"

“Actually, yes.” There’s a bounce in Van’s step that warms my heart. “I went back to the community garden. It did take me about half an hour to figure out how to get the gate open, but I got there. Watched Nef’s show again, took a nap. Grabbed some food. Made you some dinner.”

I stop in my tracks. “You made me dinner?”

“It’s nothing too fancy, but yes.”

I grab his hand. “Thank you. And thanks for walking home with me,” I say. I’m used to the easy walk everywhere, but I hadn’t realized how much I wanted someone to be by my side.

“I’ll be here every day.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to. More than anything.”

I think I do too.

14

VAN

Over the next few days, we fall into a routine and it's the best thing I've ever experienced in my life. Gabe has this down to an art and when I'm not being a dick, everything just works. My favorite part is snuggling into a too small bed with Gabe. It takes everything in me not to get rowdy and suck him off every night, but he's the one person I don't want to scare off. If I come in too hot, I might freak him out. We're compatible, I know it, but he still has a few reservations.

"We should start magic lessons," Gabe says as he's scrambling our daily eggs. He makes them so fucking good. Perfect really.

"I've been waiting for you to be ready."

"I think I finally am. I was a little afraid after... what'd you call it? My blowout. But I'm ready." He nods as if to agree with himself.

"Then let's start after we eat. You're well rested and we'll be fed. You'll have a few hours before you have to go into work. It's the perfect timing."

He nods again. "Exactly." There's a mischievous grin on his face as he plates the eggs. "And tonight, after work, I'm sucking your cock."

I swallow hard. "Do you read minds?"

“No, but you didn’t let me last time, and I need a taste.” Gabe drags his tongue along his bottom lips as he places a plate of eggs in front of me. “If you’re agreeable to it?”

“So agreeable.” I shovel the eggs in my mouth faster than I can chew and almost choke.

“You know... We don’t have to wait until after work. I could suck you off, then you give me my first magic lesson.”

I moan into my cup as I swallow down the eggs. “You’re not toying with me, are you?”

“Never.” He presses a hand to his chest. “I’ve been thinking about that cock and what it can do for days. I need a taste.”

I swallow down more water. “I’m yours to command, angel. Just tell me what you want.”

He lifts a shoulder. “Eggs, cock, magic. I think that’s a good order.”

“What about...” I lift my tail and wiggle it. “Sex lessons while you suck me off? My tail is a good starter size for anal.”

It’s his turn to swallow. His eyes drop to his plate before he nods and looks at me again. “You know what? Yes. Show me what you can do with that tail and I’ll show you why I was the blowie king in college.”

“Fuck, Gabe.” I laugh, not able to imagine him as the blowie king as he put it.

He smirks as he takes another bite of his eggs. “What? I was super horny, and I’d suck anyone off, or eat ‘em out. I was excellent with the ladies, too. But I prefer

being exclusive with partners and haven't gone on a sucking spree since I graduated."

"Are you sure you've never participated in an orgy?" I ask.

"Never. But I worked at one of Pike's a couple months ago. Not for me."

"Mmmmm. I love them. So many bodies. So many cocks."

Gabe snorts. "Cocks really are great. But..." he holds out his hands as if he's holding something. "Tits are amazing, too." He gathers our plates while I sit there with my mouth open.

"You know, I never have touched a tit. Never been interested, but shit, maybe I'm missing out?"

"Probably?" Another one shoulder shrug as he gets the water started for the dishes. "I don't even give a shit what they look like. I just like touching them. And nipples." He licks his lips. "All nipples are magical."

I take that as a cue and push to my feet to stand behind him. "Are yours magical?" I whisper as I thread my hands under his t-shirt and squeeze his nipples gently.

His head goes against my chest, pressing his nipples against me even more. "They're so sensitive, Van." He straightens again as he gets to the quick task of washing our plates. He refuses to let any dish stay dirty for longer than it takes to eat and I admire his dedication to his dishes. But right now, I want to throw him over the couch and eat his ass. Fuck him with my tail. Anything.

He washes the dishes slower today, and he moans with every press of my fingers. He's so damn sensitive and I love every moan and mew I can drag out of him. He presses his ass against my cock and my tail has a mind of its own, wrapping around

his waist and pulling him closer still. My mouth goes to his neck and I nip and suck, forgetting he probably doesn't want hickeys, but I can't help it. I need the taste of his skin on my tongue.

He finishes the pan he scrambled the eggs in and drops it into the dish drainer before he spins to face me. A hand reaches for a horn and he tugs me down.

"Kiss me, Van." His legs go around my hips and I can't help but give him what he wants.

My hands thread in his hair and tip his head back. His pupils blow wide, making his eyes look black instead of pretty brown. When our lips meet, it's more than a kiss. It's a promise. Promise of what, I don't know, but I plan to keep it. He pulls the t-shirt from me and it gets tangled in my horns before we get it free.

His grin is beautiful. If I could keep him like this for eternity, I'd be happy. No one has ever made me feel as good as Gabe does. No one has ever made me calm. No one has ever given me something to want more than the next breath. But I want Gabe. Not just for sex. No, Gabe deserves more than that. He deserves a partner and a lover. Someone that will cherish him as much as he cherishes his plant babies.

"Bedroom, now," Gabe commands in a thick voice and my cock gets harder than I think it's ever been.

I hold him tight and rush us there with him clinging to me and laughing all the way. I set him on his bed, not wanting to hurt him.

"Do you have lube?" I ask.

"Top drawer of the nightstand. But don't get distracted. I want you in my mouth." He tugs me down and I scoot to the middle of the bed, helping him remove my

sweatpants and underwear. Gabe stares at me as if he wants to worship me.

“Van, you’re so damn gorgeous.”

I snort. “No one’s ever looked at me and said anything of the sort. I’m a cock, a mouth, and a hole. Oh...” I wave both hands. “And a pair of hands. I’m a good fuck, but I’m not gorgeous.”

“You’re wrong.” Gabe drops to his knees in the space between my legs. “I’ll prove it to you.” He’s still dressed, but I completely forget about it when he climbs up my body and devours my mouth. My hands go to his hips, loving how he fits perfectly. Loving every lick of his tongue, moan, sigh. I could kiss him forever, but my cock throbs with need as he rubs against it with his jeaned ass.

Slowly, he kisses along my jaw. Down my neck, chest. Suckles at one nipple, while he fingers the other. I’ve always had sex that finished quickly, ready for the next experience just as fast. But with Gabe, I want slow. Want whatever he gives me.

His kisses find my stomach, making it jump as he slides down my body.

“You’re the biggest cock I’ve seen in real life, just so you know. I want to savor you.”

My cock jumps at his words, and he presses a palm to the underside where it lies on my stomach.

“Fuck, Gabe. Fuck.”

He leans in to press soft kisses to my balls and I squirm when he starts lavaging at me with his perfect tongue. He slurps and sucks until I’m a mess before he even moves back to my cock. Pre-cum leaks from my tip and it takes everything in me not to

come when he bats his pretty lashes at me.

“You taste so good, Van.”

“Fuck,” I chant the word.

He hums around me. “I wanna get a taste of your ass. Get up here.” We’ll do that sixty-nine he mentioned the first round.

Gabe shucks off his jeans and pulls off his shirt to scramble up the bed. He hesitates, so I maneuver him exactly how I want him with his ass in my face.

“Uh, Van? There’s a bit of a problem?” Gabe continues to stroke my cock, but there’s the noticeable absence of his lips. “I’m too short to reach you like this.” He laughs and I readjust him down my torso so he can continue to suck as much as he wants.

I lean in, taking a bite of one ass cheek, then the other. “Your ass, Gabe. Just damn.”

To my delight he bounces it, and there’s a perfect jiggle once he stops. “Fuck. That’s all I got. My brain has gone offline.”

Gabe laughs, but jokes on me when he starts sucking my cock again. With his ass in my face, I can’t watch him.

“You need a mirror on your ceiling.” I lean in again, trailing my tongue along his crack and making him squirm. I delve into his most intimate of places and moan. My eyes flutter back. “Angel, this is what I want for breakfast from now on. Those eggs are amazing, but this.” I squeeze both of his ass cheeks. “Breakfast of champions.”

He stops his sucking and lays his head on my thigh while I eat out to my heart’s content. He thrusts against my chest and I take him in hand. Gabe is so responsive,

I've never had this before. I want to play with his body until he crumbles and pleads for me to make him come. I use my tail to get into the nightstand and grab the lube. He's so open for me, I dive my tongue in his hole to the loveliest sound on earth. He's abandoned my cock and I don't even care.

"You keep going like that. I'm gonna come," he pants out.

"That's exactly what I want, angel."

"I can't concentrate." He pushes his ass back and I can't help but preen. I've distracted him.

I curl my tail around my cock and give it a few strokes before I hold it for him. "You got this, Gabe. Suck my cock while I play with your ass."

"Mmmmm." He licks at my cock, and my toes curl. His mouth really is amazing and I can see why he was crowned blowie king.

"Angel, I'm gonna lube you up. If you're ready?"

"Do it." He surges forward and takes more of my cock in his mouth before choking.

I dribble lube down his crack and use a finger to rub around his hole. Not penetrating yet. He's so lost in sucking my cock, but as soon as I press in with a finger, he tenses.

"Angel, you're doing so good for me."

He relaxes and sighs out. "Mmmmm, don't stop."

I go back to preening and add more lube before going deeper inside him. I want the experience to be positive and by the sounds he makes when I tap his prostate, I'm

hitting the mark.

“Fuck,” he pops off my cock for a breath. “What the heck was that?”

“What do you mean, what was that?” I press on the spot again and he practically melts against me. “Babes, that’s the p-spot right there.”

“Fuck. I didn’t know.”

“Are you okay? Want me to add another finger?” I pump into him a few times, making sure to hit that spot.

“If you think I’m ready.” He clutches my thighs almost painfully.

“Oh, angel, I think you’re a natural.” I add another finger and he moans so damn sweetly.

“Don’t stop. Don’t you dare stop.”

I release my tail from my cock and thrust my fingers into his ass a few times more. “I think you’re ready for my tail. If you want.”

He spreads his legs and drops his hips. Before I aim my tail, I take another bite of an ass cheek. Leaving my mark, wanting him to wear it like a badge. Again, he tenses when I press my tail to his hole.

“Want me to stop, angel?”

“No. Keep going.” More panting, and he pushes back. “Please don’t stop.”

I stroke the cleft of his ass with my tail before inserting, watching his every move. He

sighs as he relaxes into the sensation. He's so tight around me. His mouth so hot on my cock. His hole squeezing my tail. I'm not going to last if I tease him too long. I keep the end of my tail thin, but I have a lot of room to expand it if he's ever ready, but right now it's only about the size of two of my fingers. Which, granted, could be considered huge for some people, but Gabe takes me like a champ.

"Angel, you're so good to me," I moan and stroke his cock. I need something to do with my hands.

"Gonna come," he pants out. "So close." His ass tightens around my tail.

"Fuck, coming," I shout.

Cum shoots across my chest while Gabe sucks me down. He looks perfect with my tail buried in him, but I want it to be my cock some day. His legs collapse and he laughs as he slides off me to stare at the ceiling, my tail still inside.

"That...was. An experience," he says as he throws an arm over his eyes. "Never in my life..." He shakes his head. "Maybe I'm not an exclusive top."

"That's because whoever you had before didn't know what the fuck they were doing."

"Not even close. Or maybe you're just magical."

"That too." I wiggle my tail, making him moan, and I remove it from him, only to bring it to my own mouth. "I can't get enough of your taste on my tongue."

"Same. Damn." Gabe wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand. "I think I drank every drop."

“You sucked me dry.” I spin him so his head’s on my chest.

He throws a leg over my thigh, claiming me. I can’t help pulling him in closer. Most of the time, I just want to run to the next partner, but Gabe makes me want to stay. Want to talk. Want to know him even more.

“What was your first experience with anal?” I’m too curious not to ask.

He rubs his head against me and circles one of my nipples. “Painful. Not enough lube. We’d been making out every day after school. Little bit of frotting, hand jobs, blow jobs. He wanted to go to the next step, and I’d agreed, but I’m not sure I was ready, you know?”

“I don’t, but go on.” I kiss the top of his head.

“We both brought condoms. He didn’t want to bottom, and I was curious, so again I agreed. He slipped on a condom and just... tried to ram it in.”

I still his wily hand. “No. Fuck. That’s horrible. No prep or anything?”

“Not even a make out sesh. He just wanted to go at it. There was a lot of shouting. Eventually, I relaxed, and he finished, but we never made out again after that.”

“He’s a jerk.”

“He was. But he was hot.” Gabe giggles. “The next couple of guys were much the same until college. Most of the guys said I was too femme to top. Who the hell says that?”

“Humans are such assholes, and that’s me saying that.” Because I’m the ultimate asshole.

“By the time I graduated high school, I was ready to experiment with chicks, too. And tits are truly delightful.”

I snort and pull him closer. “You’re full of so many surprises.”

He shrugs. “I like trying new things.”

“Speaking of. Let’s talk magic.”

“I might be too tired now.” He yawns, but there’s a smile in his eyes.

“It won’t take long. Magic is... easy. Like breathing air. It’s something you don’t need to think too hard about. That’s why the humans never get it right in their silly little forums or whatever.”

“But I’ve gotten it to work with those techniques.”

“And you’ve had how many blow outs because of it?” I rub a hand down his back when he tenses. “Let go of all those ridiculous teachings. Take a deep breath. Close your eyes and just follow my voice.”

He nods and settles in closer. “Ready.”

“What kind of magic do you have?”

“Dunno really. I can probably fly, but I’ve never tried.”

“You’ve never tried flying?” It’s one of the best feelings in the world.

Gabe pushes to his elbows to look me in the eye. “Where would I be able to fly where humans won’t be able to see me?”

“You’re in Hex now, angel. So everywhere.”

He nibbles his bottom lip and dips back into my chest. “Right. Forgot.”

“So probably flying. That’s an entirely different type of magic. But what else can you do?”

“I can do some random things, like I got you mostly in my apartment with magic before I needed Pike’s help. Mostly, I bend things to my will, but you saw the fall out when I try too hard.”

“And I’m saying the effort should be effortless, just a thought.”

“It’s really that easy?” He whispers.

“Yep. Try it.” I press a kiss to his palm. I have to wonder if how he calms me is part of his magic or just his presence calms me because it’s Gabe.

He rests his hand on my stomach. His fingers glow white and ropes of energy wrap around me. Gabe gasps and pulls away, taking the energy with him.

“It took so much effort and a feather to do that when we met.”

“A feather?”

“Yeah, my feathers always help my magic. But this is a game changer.” He presses his hand to my stomach again and repeats the magic ropes. They wrap around my chest in an intricate pattern. His eyes glow and he lifts his hand, bringing me off the bed.

Gabe gets too excited and I crash back down, hoping not to break his bed.

“You’re such a good teacher, Van!” Gabe straddles my waist and presses kisses to my lips over and over.

“Don’t get carried away. You just followed directions. We’ll have to practice every day, and perhaps that book of yours has more information. It might tell you what your magic does.”

With that, Gabe races from the room.

Gabe

My ass doesn’t hurt like it had before when I’d let partners have their way with me. Maybe a dull ache, but nothing that feels like sandpaper against my delicate button. I grab the book from The Magic Shop off the couch and race back to my room.

“I haven’t gotten it to work since that day in The Magic Shop. The day we met.” I hand Van the book.

“It worked for me. That day you had the blowout. We chatted.”

The book remains empty as we talk about it. “When it worked, I had a feather. I’ll probably need one again just to get it to work.” I drop on the bed with a huff. “Unless...” I hold the book and take a deep breath. “Work.”

And nothing.

I poke the cover a few times. “Pretty please? How do I be a nephilim?”

Be Yourself comes across the cover and I suck in a breath.

“That’s exactly how it did me. I said something, and it gave me a snarky ass response

back. Not a fan.”

“I need more than that,” I say. Hoping for more. “Just a little more. I’m always myself.”

Embrace Your Nephilim-Self.

“How?” I cry out the word, begging to be shown the way.

The words fade from the cover.

Van’s fingers drag down my back. “Perhaps... you need to let your wings out.”

“I can’t.” I push off the bed. “Terrible things happen when my wings are out. When my feathers shed.” I hug myself. But... Van wasn’t a terrible thing. He’s just what I needed.

Something flutters out of the corner of my eye and I snatch up the Empress/Consort tarot card that’s been taunting me. It hangs upside down, staring at me. “What do you want?”

Perhaps Self-Love And Care Are In Order? Now the book speaks again. Get In Touch With Your Nephilim-Self.

“No.”

“I’ll help you,” Van rubs my back again. “You still view yourself as human. You’re not human, Gabe. You’re a nephilim. I think the book’s right. You need to learn to embrace your full-self.”

“How do I do that when I can’t allow my feathers to fall into the wrong hands?”

They're too powerful. If someone like... like..." I search my brain for something. "Like Drake got a hold of one, they could do devastating things."

"Such as?" Van brushes hair from my eyes.

"You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me."

I pace at the end of the bed. "A couple years ago, a necromancer found me."

Van goes stiff on the bed. "In the human world?"

"Yes. He wanted as many feathers as he could steal to animate his zombies or revenants, whatever, without a price. He tore my feathers from me while I screamed until my throat went raw."

Van gathers me in his arms and pulls me to his chest. "Who was it? I'll kill them!"

"No. You won't. I got free chanting Ring-A-Round-The-Rosie and forcing my wings away."

Van cocks a brow. "What?"

"Ring-A-Round-The-Rosie trapped the zombie. The necromancer got so frustrated he quit paying attention to me and I got away while he kept trying to free his zombie."

"You're clever, aren't you?"

"Desperate." I sink into his hold. "My feathers only bring out the bad in people. I can't just reveal them."

“So you’re trying to be a nephilim without being a nephilim.” Van kisses the top of my head. “I don’t think it works that way. You can’t get answers if you’re not willing to face the truth.”

“Never thought about it like that.”

“I can help. I won’t let anyone near you.”

I nod. “Maybe. Someday.” But now I don’t think I’m ready.

“Come on, nap time. I’m worn out.” Van stretches and I could kiss him for changing the subject. In fact. I do.

15

GABE

Van took to his plant lessons much better than the knitting ones. He'll usually just sit and watch me knit my latest project rather than attempt one again. This morning he took care of my babies and I slept in just a tiny bit. Tiny tiny bit. I watched him through squinted eyes in the bedroom as he talked to Joseph, Lila, and Paris while watering them. I don't know if he realizes how soothing he can be, but he lulled me back to sleep with his sweet words.

Work was busy with a pole dancing night. Sparkle and Kirsty pulled in so many patrons, me and Goldie rushed all night long. My feet hurt and I just want to shuffle into bed. When the humid air outside steals my breath, I groan. Soup air at night is worse than during the day.

"Gabe." I snap my head towards Van and grin. "Angel, I have a tiny problem." He grits his teeth and I realize he's hiding something.

"What's wrong?"

"I know you said no pets, but..." He holds up his hand to show me a tiny white kitten. "I found him crying in a ditch and couldn't just leave him." Van pets the kitten on the top of his head with one finger and coos. "You're a little sweetheart, aren't you?"

"You want to keep him?"

Van nods. “But I’ll find a home for him if you’re opposed to it.”

“I’ll just have to pay a pet deposit and pet rent, but it’s not too awful much.” Plus, if the kitten makes Van this happy, there’s no way I’m denying him. “But are you sure it’s not a shifter? He looks an awful lot like?”

Sparkle bursts from the door. “Have you two seen—” His hands fly to his chest. “Ferris.” He holds out his hands. “My mom texted during my set and said he ran off. I’m so glad you found him.”

Van’s shoulders drop, and he passes the kitten to Sparkle. “He was so scared. I kept him company.”

“You tell Van thank you, you little shit. You had mom terrified.”

The kitten shakes in Sparkle’s hand when he squats to the ground. “Shift and say thank you.”

“He doesn’t need to. I’m glad I could help,” Van says.

The tiny kitten gingerly steps off Sparkle’s hand and slowly grows into a boy no older than seven.

“Thank you, Van. Momma was going to clip my nails and I don’t like it.” Ferris shakes his head so hard he topples over.

“It’s okay. You were so good for me, but you need to go home. Let your momma clip your nails, okay? It’s easier when you’re human.” Van rakes his hand out as if he had claws, making Ferris giggle while he shrinks back into his kitten form.

Ferris meows a few baby sounds before Sparkle lifts him to his chest. “I know you

hate getting your nails clipped, but it's for your own good. And the good of momma's floors." He pats his little brother on the head. "Thank you again for finding him, Van."

"My pleasure."

Sparkle walks away and I take Van's hand. "We can get you a kitten if you want. I don't mind."

He shakes his head. "I think I just..." He stops to think a step. "I wanted to be needed."

"I need you," I whisper so softly I'm not sure he heard me until he lifts my hand to his lips and kisses.

Comfortable silence hangs between us on our walk to the apartment. As soon as we're through the door, I yank him down for a sloppy kiss. "Please, I need you."

"Whatever you need, Gabe. I'm yours to command."

"Bedroom. Naked. Now."

Van's eyes light up and I chase him to my—our—room. We leave a trail of clothes. My hurting feet are forgotten when I push him back against the bed.

"Fuck me," Van says.

"Plan to." I walk around to grab the lube from the nightstand. "If you?—"

Van flips to his stomach and pushes out his ass. "Yes, please." He's so eager I can't help the laugh.

“Good. It’s been a long night and I need to bury myself in your ass before passing out.” I don’t know why, but it’s what I need.

Van moans into the blanket. I admire his ass. It’s shapely and round. Perfect. “Spread your cheeks for me.”

He reaches back and does as I ask. I lean in and swipe my tongue across his ass.

“Mmmmm. You taste so good, Van.” I press my nose to him and lave at his hole, savoring every moan that comes from my demon’s throat.

“Fuck. Gabe. You suck dick like a champ, but damn. Your ass eating skills are off the chart.” Van pushes back and I moan while I suck and slurp.

“You’re so good, Van. So perfect with your ass spread open for me.” I press a finger to his hole and just tease him. He writhes on the bed, leaving pre-cum dripping from his cock.

“Fuck, and you called me a tease,” Van pants out. He grips the other side of the mattress. “Fuck me.”

I snap the lube bottle open. I’m not even touching him and he moans.

My cock is so hard while I stroke it, dribbling lube down Van’s crack. I lube myself before using my cock to spread the slick material over his hole.

He’s begging and pleading. “I need your cock in me now, Gabe.” He spreads his ass again.

“Such a good little hole.” I line up with his hole.

Van sucks in a breath when I press into him. He's so relaxed I slide right in.

"Holy fuck, don't stop. Don't you dare fucking stop."

"Don't plan on it." I drag out slowly, loving the feel of him around my cock. "So good, Van."

He mewls and pushes back, slamming into me. I smack his ass for that, then pick up the pace. Neither of us seems to have the patience for slow and sensual tonight. My balls ram against his ass with each thrust. We're a sweaty mess, grunting and moaning.

"Don't fucking stop." Van's head drops to the mattress again and bounces his ass on my cock. I grip his hips and pump into him, using his rhythm.

My balls draw up. "Gonna come."

Van pulls off me, making my knees tremble, when he spins around and hangs his head off the bed. "I want every last drop. Come down my throat."

"How can I say no to that?"

Van jerks himself as he sucks my cock. His hips stutter at the same time I shout out my release. I fall forward, panting, breathing in his scent. No doubt getting some cum in my hair in the process, but I don't care.

"Mmmm, angel, that was a good surprise. You can fuck my ass any day." His tail wiggles as if to agree.

I press kisses to his chest and push back to my feet.

“Don’t leave.”

“I just wanna clean you up a bit.” Though his cum streaked stomach is such a turn on my cock tries to rally. He lets me go and I grab a clean washrag and run it under some warm water.

He watches me, seemingly in awe, as I wipe up his stomach, licking a bit of cum before cleaning him up. He lets me wipe the lube from his crack. Before I can do anything else, he pulls me into him.

“You’re too good to me,” Van mumbles into my hair.

“I don’t think that’s a thing.” He deserves everything.

“For me it is.” Van kisses my temple and we settle into bed. I’d forgotten all about the busy night and when it tries to keep me awake, he kisses my cheek and pulls me closer.

16

VAN

Four hundred and eighty hours left on my count down. I've been with Gabe for twenty days. Eleven days left to live if I don't get my shit together.

"Stop scratching," Pike says. The look of horror when flecks of my skin fall onto the bar top makes me laugh.

"It itches."

"Go somewhere else to scratch it, then. I don't need your crusties on my bar."

"Might appeal to a certain kind of clientele, though." I scratch again.

"Not ones I want. Shoo!" Pike literally waves his hands as if to shoo me away.

"Fine. Fine." I shoot my shot of HellFire and watch Gabe smile at that dumbass Domhnall. I have to wonder if he always smiles at the gargoyle when I'm not around. I shouldn't be jealous. Gabe isn't mine. Not yet, I don't think, but I want him to be.

I make my way to the couch Frankie plays on and take up residence there. I didn't want to stay at the apartment. I'd dusted the entire place two days ago, and done a few other chores, and I'm bored. There's nothing to do.

"Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" Someone I don't recognize saunters over and

shimmies up beside me on the couch. “Haven’t seen you for a while. I’ve missed your big cock. Wanna go for a round out back? Or on the roof?” He walks his fingers up my arm and I pull away.

“Sorry, my heart’s been taken.” Even as I say the words, I know them to be true. Gabe has my heart.

The stranger pouts and his shoulders drop. He looks positively devastated. “He’s a lucky man, then.” He squeezes my arm. “Because your cock is a dream.” He sighs and pushes to his feet. “Guess I’ll just have to keep playing with others. Find someone else to fulfill my dreams.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard. You’re a catch.” And I mean it, I really do. I may not remember him, because I’m an asshole, but he’s worthy of finding a partner better than I could be for him.

“You’d think it’d be easy. But no.” His hips sway gently as he walks up to the bar. I can’t hear what Gabe says, but the guy instantly grins wide and his entire attitude changes. That’s just what Gabe does. He makes people happy.

The telltale flash of energy that’s my brother shimmers in the air before he teleports. Wick watches me watch Gabe before scooting in and sitting next to me. “You love him, don’t you?”

“I think so, yeah.” I thread a hand through my hair. “He’s everything I’m not, and he doesn’t judge.” I turn to Wick. “Do you have any idea what it’s like not to be judged?”

“Yeah.” Wick sighs. “Ethan never judged me. I’m so lost without him, Van. I just don’t know what to do and it keeps getting worse. I saw the wedding announcement. That’s not what he wanted.” Wick fists his hands and Frankie trots over to him to lay

her head in his lap. “Thanks, girl. You’re so good to me.”

“I’m sorry I’ve judged you about Ethan. I wish I knew how to help.”

Wick buries his face in Frankie’s fur and breathes deeply before coming back up. “I can’t bear to think of him with Florence, even if Flo is one of his best friends. He’s gay. Florence is non-binary and aroace. I don’t hate Flo, but I know the two won’t be happy because of the arrangement. He was twelve when he summoned me to help them both, and the stupid rules kept me from making a deal with him until he was eighteen. I understand your frustrations with the rules. I really do. It’s why I get so damn irritated with you about breaking them.”

My heart sinks. I’ve known the story for years, but never put the pieces together like that. Wick wishes he would have broken the rules to get what he wanted. But he didn’t. He was a good little crossroads demon and I never am.

“I’m sorry. Fuck, I’m sorry Wick.” I pull him close and we rock on the couch together like we did when we were kids. Sometimes it helps. I don’t know how long we stay like this before Frankie licks at my elbow and Gabe stands in front of us with a tray.

“Thought you two might be hungry, so I brought some of your favorite bar foods.” Gabe sets the tray on the coffee table in front of us.

“Thanks, angel,” I say as I press a kiss to my brother’s temple. We demons get attached so damn easily. I know if something happened to Gabe, and he disappeared, I’d tear the world apart to find him.

It’s easy to tell Wick to just get over Ethan, but I know it’s not truly that simple. Especially for someone like Warwick who took years to fall for Ethan in the first place. He thought he was aroace himself for the longest time, but he’s

demi—romantic and sexual. Once he fell for Ethan, he fell hard. My only concern now is what if Ethan isn't the Ethan he remembers when they finally meet again?

I watch Gabe's ass as he walks back to the bar.

Wick snorts next to me as he shovels a mozzarella stick in his mouth. "You have it bad."

"I do."

"I'm happy for you. Gabe's sweet. I think that's just what you need in your life."

"I do to." I bump Wick's shoulder with mine. "Speaking of which, he wants to be your friend, but he thinks you hate him."

Wick's mouth drops open. "What? No. I don't hate him."

"That's what I told him."

"I'll have to be nicer. I've been a bit of an ass when Domhnall shows up. And he's always showing up lately." He clenches his jaw and watches the front door. "Speaking of the asshole."

"It's like you summon him with your anger." I laugh at Wick's scowl.

"I think I do hate him. He's always poking fun at everyone. Even Lark and Gabe. Who does that?"

"Assholes, like you said." I tell him about meeting Domhnall in the laundromat and Gabe's blow out. "I'm teaching Gabe magic. He's a quick study."

“You’re a good teacher.” Wick elbows me a little too sharply.

“I’m really not.”

He leans away and eyes me. “You were the top of your class, don’t you remember? Poe asked you to tutor people, and you turned him down.”

“I’d forgotten about that.”

“Poe said you had the most potential of everyone in centuries and?—”

“I flushed it all down the toilet.”

“No, not yet anyway.” His eyes drop to my chest where the device still counts down beneath my t-shirt. “I know you’re capable of great things, Van. And I think if you let Gabe guide you, you’ll be an amazing king one day. I really do.”

I scratch at my chest again. “But no one thinks I’m ready.”

“Because you’re not. Even now, with Gabe’s influence, you’re not ready. But you’re young. Poe was already two centuries old before he took up the mantle. There’s time. Why are you always wanting to rush things? Enjoy what you have.” His gaze travels down the bar and to Gabe’s smiling face.

“You’re right and wise beyond your years, Wicky.” If I were the king now, I wouldn’t have time to enjoy my angel as much. Poe is single for a reason. Crossroads demons are a handful.

“Dunno about that, but I’ll take it.”

17

GABE

There's something flaming on my doorstep when I open the door to head out for work.

"Van? Do you know what this is?" I call out. "Is it a demon ritual of some sort?"

He joins me with duster in hand, and he looks over my shoulder. "Fuck. Don't touch it."

"What is it?" I squat to get a closer look. It appears to be a disk with something written on it, but I don't know the language.

"A calling card of a demon I pissed off in the Hellrealm."

My stomach twists. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I may have humiliated him in the ring."

"Ring?" I cock a brow.

"Fighting ring. Was the only way I could stay hidden from Poe."

"Not following." I stand to meet his gaze.

“The short of it.... I needed a charm to keep me hidden when I got summoned to my crossroads, so I hired a Hellwitch to make the charm but didn’t have money, so I was their pit fighter for the last year before Poe found me. Never lost. I imagine someone wants a rematch and finally discovered where I am.” Van looks around. “Got any salt? It’ll neutralize the magic and make it safe to touch.”

I rush to the kitchen to grab the salt shaker from the cabinet. “All I got.”

“It’ll do.” Van unscrews the top and pours it over the disk, making it sputter until the flames go out. “Still, don’t touch it.” He nudges it with his toe. “I’m coming with you to work today.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Probably?” He shrugs. “It could be a prank, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

“Smart. Tell me about these fights?”

“Not much to say. It’s like dog fights, but with demons and Hellwitches instead of animals. Some were fights to the death, but I never participated in those because my Hellwitch wanted me alive to keep fighting.”

“You don’t think it’s the Hellwitch wanting you back?”

“Nah. He was satisfied with my performance and wouldn’t come after me. I more than paid for the charm.”

I nod as I press a hand to his chest. “I haven’t seen you wear a charm.”

“Poe took it,” Van grinds his teeth. “When he sent me to Hex.”

“Which wasn’t a bad thing, right?” I ask, tugging on his shirt to pull him down.

“No, it wasn’t.” He presses his lips to mine, and I melt into his embrace. His tail wraps around my arm. “You’re the best thing to come out of all this. Well, and I think Wick isn’t so angry at me anymore.”

“I have a question I’ve been meaning to ask.” But never felt right asking.

“I’ll answer you anything.”

“What caused you to start breaking the crossroads rules?”

A hint of a smile lifts his lips. “Someone picked on Wicky and I lost it. We’re not allowed to fight among ourselves, but I was eleven, Wick was four. Some asshole a few years older than me started mocking Wick and his feathered wings. While we joke that he may be part angel, we don’t mock him for it. Feathers don’t mean angels.”

“It does for me.” I kiss him again.

“And I’m happy for it.” Van picks up the disk from the doorstep and pockets it. “When that asshole started mocking Wick, I saw red. He may have been two feet taller than me, but I wasn’t backing down. Poe had to tear us apart. He told the asshole to stick to his age bracket in the creche or find himself at a crossroads. Haven’t seen him since, but I probably wouldn’t recognize him, anyway.”

“And you?”

“Oh, I got diaper duty.” Van sticks his tongue out and shakes out his hands. “Poe said it’d help me be calmer to be with the babies, but it didn’t work. I can’t deal with all the screaming and crying.”

“I can’t see you working with babies.” I snort at the image in my head. “Though if you put your mind to it?—”

“It’s a no from me. I don’t enjoy them at all.”

“My plants are my babies. I don’t think I’d do well with kids either. But I might change my mind in a few centuries.” I chuckle at the thought and his face. “Come on, I have to get to work.” I take his hand, but he pulls away.

“Let me just change into something else real quick. Won’t be long.” Van releases me and rushes to my room. He’s in a pair of jeans and a fresh t-shirt before I know it. I don’t know where he put the duster, but it doesn’t matter. “I love walking with you to work. Fresh air, stretch my legs. Being with you.” His tail claims my waist again, and I lean into him as we walk. “It’s really?—”

And he’s summoned again. Panic tries to set in. What if it’s the demon that wants to fight him? I don’t know where Van’s crossroads is to chase after him. Maybe Warwick will know. Or Pike.

I race to Flutter and Fangs and burst through the door, panting.

“Are you okay?” Lark asks as he rushes to my side.

“Van. Van’s crossroads. Do any of you know where it’s at?”

Pike swallows from the bar. “We’re forbidden from knowing exactly which crossroads is assigned to who. I still don’t know, and I’ve been released from my crossroads.”

“Shit.”

I spin, looking for Wick, finding him with Frankie on the far couch.

“What’s wrong?” Wick says when I reach him.

“There’s someone after Van and I’m worried they summoned him to fight.”

Wick goes pale. “Let me... Let me go search for him.” And he disappears.

“I’m being silly, aren’t I?” I ask Pike and Lark.

Lark takes my hands. “No. You’re worried.” He looks to Pike. “It’s understandable with how you feel about him.”

“We enjoy each other’s company,” I say, knowing in my heart it’s more than that.

Lark cocks a pink brow at me. “Don’t lie to yourself. You’re in love. We’ve seen the way you look at each other. You have heart eyes more than not.”

“He’s nothing like anyone says he is. No one’s given him a chance to just be Van. He’s on edge most of the time, but it’s so subtle no one would know if they weren’t looking for it. I just... Van’s amazing.”

Pike laughs. “I know, but he’s stubborn as fuck.”

“That too.” My cheeks heat at the naughty thoughts of his cock, and his mouth on mine.

“Your mind is in the gutter, isn’t it?” Lark asks.

“Deep in the gutter,” I say. “I can’t get enough of his lips.”

“That’s tame.” Pike huffs.

“We’re in polite company,” I say, making Lark laugh.

Lark waves at Pike. “This demon is not polite company. He’ll talk about sex all day if we let him. Ever since he became an incubus.”

“Has Van shown you that tail thing he does?” Wren, Lark’s older brother, comes from the kitchen with a chicken finger hanging from his mouth. “Nothing like that tail thing he does.” He brushes his long white hair over his shoulder. “Sorry for the late notice.” He pulls the chicken from his mouth and tugs Lark in for a hug. Wren’s bigger than Lark, taller, more muscles, but it’s obvious they’re brothers.

“I wouldn’t say you gave any notice, but I’m happy to see you this week,” Lark says.

“And you’re eating more of my food,” Pike grumbles.

Wren drops a few coins from the Fae lands on the countertop. “I’m paying this time, see ?” He winks at Pike who rolls his eyes.

“Wait. Do you know where Van’s crossroads is?” I ask Wren.

“Sorry, I don’t. We fucked around in the bathroom a few times and never even left the bar.”

“Didn’t need to know that,” Lark deadpans.

“Well, now you do. Where’s that kitty cat boy? We have a D appointment.”

“Sparkle isn’t in yet,” Pike says.

“Then I’ll wait.” Wren hops over the bar top and slides onto a stool. “Don’t have any courtesan duties for three days. I plan to make the most out of them.”

There’s a sizzle behind me.

“I can’t find him.” There’s panic in Warwick’s voice. He paces. “But that doesn’t mean anything. I won’t be able to find him if he’s at his crossroads.”

I pace with him. “So I shouldn’t worry?”

“Not yet.”

“I don’t know that I’ll be able to concentrate until I see him again.”

Lark waves at Frankie’s couch. “Go sit with Frankie.”

“I can’t?—”

The door opens and in strolls Van. I rush to his side and pat him down, making him laugh. “What’s wrong, angel?” He brushes hair from my eyes and I can’t stop looking him over, making sure every piece of him is still there.

“I was worried. You just told me about someone that wants to fight you, then you disappeared. I thought maybe they summoned you.”

He wraps me in his arms and pulls me close. I burrow as close as I possibly can.

“Sorry I scared you.” Van’s voice is so gentle as he caresses my back.

I shake my head. “I may have overreacted.”

We stand there until I feel like I can breathe again, and I suck in his scent.

“I got you, Gabe.”

We have an audience, and I don’t care. At least until the door opens and in strolls Domhnall, of all people.

“Lookie here,” he says. “You’re still alive.”

Warwick charges the gargoyle before he can say anything else.

“Wick, don’t,” Van shouts and Wick stops short of attacking. “What do you want Domhnall? All you do is antagonize us. Why don’t you?—”

Domhnall throws something at Van. It looks suspiciously like the disk from earlier. Van spins, so it hits him in the back.

“Shoren says hi,” Domhnall says before he saunters back out of the bar.

“Who is Shoren?” Pike growls as he jumps over the counter.

“Don’t touch me.” Van tries to see what Domhnall threw at him, but can’t.

“Salt,” I shout.

“Fuck,” Van says. “Shoren’s issued a challenge. I can’t not accept.”

“You can reject him,” I say as Lark hands me a shaker of salt. I pour over the disk until the flames go out and it drops off him.

“No, he can’t.” Pike picks up the disk. “What did you do in the Hellrealm, Van?”

“What I had to, to survive.” Van snarls and snatches the disk. He snaps it in two, sparking a flame in the air. “I accept your challenge. Meet me in the cornfield between here and the farmhouse. One hour.” The flame glows red and snuffs out.

“What have you done?” Pike asks again.

“I’m keeping everyone safe. When I take him out, he won’t bother anyone ever again.”

“Please, don’t,” I beg him. “I don’t want to— can’t lose you.”

“You won’t. I’ve never lost a fight yet.”

“Van. Walk away. Please.” Say no.

“I have to prepare.”

I don’t chase after him when he leaves, but Wick and Wren disappear. Hopefully to talk sense into him. My legs threaten to buckle. “He doesn’t need to do this. He doesn’t.” I shake my head.

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VAN

My gut tells me this isn't a smart move. But I'm me, and I always take up the challenge. Always.

Shoren's a behemoth with about two brain cells. This should be a quick and easy fight like last time, but my stomach twists. Bad idea. Bad idea. Maybe it's because Gabe begged me not to fight. Maybe it's instinct.

Shoren stands opposite me. His gray skin is streaked with deep mustard yellow scars where I'd fought him before. Black horns thicker than my forearms grace his head. Fangs mash as he tries to look intimidating, but I find it hilarious.

A crowd's gathered in the cornfield. Word gets around Hex fast. Even Poe showed up. He doesn't say anything to me, but I know he's disappointed. Why wouldn't he be? I'm fighting. Again .

A witch sets a perimeter spell to protect Hex. Smart.

Shoren slams his beefy hands together and roars. My heart pounds and I push back the bile that threatens to come up. This is a bad idea. Bad. Bad. Bad. But I agreed and I'll follow through.

Wick appears, bringing Gabe with him. My angel rushes toward me, but the perimeter spell stops him.

“I love you, Van,” he shouts for all of Hex to hear him. He presses a hand to the perimeter spell.

Fuck. What am I doing? Am I truly so selfish to put this sweet angel’s heart on the line? Put everyone in Hex in harm’s way? “I love you, Gabe.” I turn to Shoren. “I can’t. I forfeit. You win! Tell them you?—”

I choke as my chest tightens. Something’s wrong. The countdown device burns through my shirt and I drop to my knees as it falls away. My wings spring from my back as I grin at Poe, who tips his head and disappears. I guess my punishment is over. But I still have a massive demon staring me down.

Shoren rages and storms my way.

Gabe screams like a banshee and races towards me. Before I know what’s happening, he’s clutching me, massive black wings wrapped around me. Protecting me .

But he’s not my tiny angel, no, Gabe is taller by several feet and keeping me safe from Shoren. His wings are like steal, not letting Shoren’s blows through.

The demon screeches and rips out feather after feather as Gabe trembles around me. My beloved’s cries tear at my heart and I turn in his embrace. “Let me go, Gabe. We can send him back to the Hellrealm together.”

“I couldn’t let him hurt you. I think I destroyed the perimeter spell.”

I kiss him over and over, noticing a halo of stars around his head. “Ready?”

Gabe nods, and on the next breath, he releases me. My magic is back in full force, letting me teleport, popping around Shoren to confuse him. Gabe yanks out one of his feathers with a grimace. I have to keep my surprise at bay when the feather turns into

a sword and he charges Shoren.

“You can not have Van. He’s mine!”

“Send him my way!” I open a portal and hope it stays open long enough to send Shoren through it.

Gabe doesn’t get a cut in with Shoren’s thick skin, but he does force the demon my way with each swing. “Be gone. You’re not welcome in this realm and if you try to come for Van ever again, your life will be forfeit.” At Gabe’s words, a spell, or perhaps a curse, burns into Shoren’s forehead and he tumbles into my portal.

My portal seals behind Shoren, and I drop to my knees panting. Gabe throws down his sword, where it turns back into a feather the moment it touches the ground. He rushes to me and I have to look up at him.

The crowd around us roars, but all I notice is Gabe. My Gabe.

“You know, this changes things, angel. I’m going to need you to fuck me with that big nephilim cock.”

He burst out laughing. “You don’t care that this is the nephilim me? A giant?”

“No, babes. I love you every way I can get you.” For once, I have to stand on my tiptoes and pull him down for a kiss. “But seriously, how big is that cock, because it’s a need.” I press against him, forgetting the crowd altogether.

He pulls his wings in. “Take me home and I’ll show you,” he whispers.

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19

GABE

The moment I decided to embrace my nephilim-self, the magic book worked again. It's been two days of me pouring over the book, asking it questions for hours until Van pulls me to bed.

You Know All There Is To Know.

“That's impossible!”

You Know All I Know.

I plop down on the couch. “But there's still so much to ask you.”

Ah, One Thing We Did Not Go Over.

“Yes?” I lean closer and squint, trying to figure out what it's kept from me.

Are You A Healer Or Destroyer?

My stomach twists. “Dunno. I'm sure I have the potential for both, but?—”

That's The Only Correct Answer. Use Your Knowledge Wisely. And Don't Be Afraid To Fly.

The page fades and I frown. Flying terrifies me as much as it thrills me.

“Gabe? What’s wrong?” Van poofs into the living room after a summons from Poe. We’d discussed at length that he didn’t want to be set free like Pike or Warwick. With Poe’s blessing he wants to be the next crossroads king. When he’s ready.

“Nothing. Apparently I’ve devoured all the knowledge on nephilim’s the book has to offer. How did your meeting with Poe go?”

“Amazing. We’ve cleared up everything. Wick’s off the hook for my fuck ups and he’s been given a year free from deals to make up for the last year. I’ll do double deals as much as possible. But Poe says I truly have the potential to be the next king. In a few centuries.”

“I’m so happy for you. And I have a special treat. Since you finally talked to Poe.”

“What would that be, angel?” He saunters over and I push to my feet.

“Fuck me, please?” I bat my lashes and bend over the couch arm. “I’m all ready for you.” I wiggle my ass and pull the lube bottle from my pocket.

He’s practically drooling when he gets to me and yanks my pants down my legs.

“Fuck.” He taps the buttplug a few times, making me moan.

“Wore it all day. I didn’t want you to have to wait.”

“Our lessons really have done you good.”

I wiggle, rubbing my cock on the couch arm. If I were smart, I would have put down a towel, but I’m too feral for it.

“I need you, please, Van. Don’t hold back. We’ve been practicing. I can take it.” I want him.

His nose is in my crack before my next breath. Then he pulls the plug from my hole. I made sure to use a bunch of lube and some of it drains from me while he pushes it back in with his finger.

“MMmmmm. Cock. Please.” I wiggle around again.

Instead of doing as I asked, he flips me to sit on the couch arm and face him. “I wanna see that pretty face when you moan out my name.” He tosses me over his shoulder and carries me to the bedroom, where he plops me onto my bottom.

Instead of giving me what I asked for, he drops to his knees and worships my cock with his tongue as he fingers my hole. My hands thread into his hair as I writhe beneath him.

“Your tongue is magic. So fucking magic,” I say.

“My cock is even better.” He presses his tail to my mouth and I suck as he stands.

My heart pounds as he lines up with my hole. His hands grip my hips as he thrusts. My eyes roll back and my mouth drops open, forgetting his tail.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” I chant with each thrust. He hits my prostate every damn time. He’s so big, much bigger than his tail, but I’m glad I prepared for this. Glad we trained my ass for this. “I’m... I’m not... Not an exclusive top. Too good. Fuck.”

“I know, angel.”

“Verse. So verse.”

“Mmmm, good to hear.” Van thrusts over and over, pounding into me so hard I move across the bed. I hold the other side of the mattress as he seems to chase me. His knees on the bed, bunching the blankets.

“Gonna come,” I gasp at the same time my cock spurts. Ropes shoot across my chest and Van growls, and he leans down to lick me clean. “Come in my ass, Van.” I’ve never let anyone do that before, but I want Van to.

“Mmmm, I’ll do ya one better.” He grips my hips tighter and thrusts as he shouts. As soon as he gains his breath, he pulls out and pushes my thighs to my chest. “Now, to clean you up.” His tongue darts to my ass and I squirm along the bed wanting more, though I’m already so damn sensitive. He doesn’t stop until he’s satisfied and he plops down next to me, panting. “That was such a good surprise.”

“I thought you’d enjoy it.” I climb into his lap.

“I enjoy everything. You’re the light of my life as cliché as fuck as that is. Without you, I wouldn’t have learned my lesson. I would have perished.”

I drop kisses all over his face and trace over the faint scar where the countdown device used to be. “You would have learned. You just didn’t think you were worthy of love, so you acted out. But, Van, you are loved. Not just by me and Wick. You have friends that love you. Poe loves you.”

He snorts at that.

“Truly. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have kept trying to help you.” I kiss him again. “It’s okay to be a bit selfish, and no one expects you to be perfect. But talk to people when you need to straighten things out instead of letting things?—”

“Go to shit.”

“Exactly.” I nuzzle into him. “You’re doing great, Van. Don’t try to live life too fast. We have all eternity to make mistakes.”

VAN - THREE MONTHS LATER

I pick up Gabe's book from The Magic Shop to pack up and the Empress/Consort card flies out. I hold it up to show Gabe. "You know, when I'm king, you'll be my consort. How great is that?" We may not be getting married, at least not anytime soon, why rush. But he's still mine and only mine.

He snorts as he continues packing. "Love it. I hadn't even thought about it, but you're right."

"Should we take the book back to The Magic Shop? Maybe someone else can use it?" I ask.

"We should probably take that silly card with us if we do."

"It taught me a lot of lessons, you know. Well, it led me to trusting you to teach me the lessons." I pull him in for a hug. "I think you learned a few lessons yourself?"

"I have. Embrace myself, do a bit of pampering every now and then. Talk with the stars."

"I think you already did that."

"I did. But now I have a halo of stars and can tap into their power. It's so cool."

"And terrifying." I shudder to tease him.

“I’ll never use it, though.” He kisses my shoulder as we stare at the mess we’ve made.

Over the last three months, Poe has noticed a marked improvement in my attitude and has decided to gift me with a Hellhound of my own. The small apartment isn’t big enough for a Hellhound, so we’re renting a bigger house with a yard. I also have my house in the demon realm, but I don’t want Gabe in that drab place. He deserves the pretty fall colors and soft gentle snow of the human world. If he ever wants to venture to my home realm, I’ll take him, but for now, Hex is where our hearts live.

The end