



# Virgin Lust

**Author:** *Michelle Gross*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult

**Description:** Prudence Reaper has been cursed with the sin of lust since she was a child. She's evaded her desires for over a century by stealing pleasure from men's dreams. It's been the only way to hide a small piece of herself from the curse.

Everything changes when she crosses paths with Shepherd Donovan.

Shepherd is one of the last soul reapers left in any world. Not that he cares. Shepherd loathes himself more than the Reapers who drove his kind nearly to extinction. He wants nothing more than to ignore his demon DNA, but that becomes impossible when he lays eyes on the raven-haired beauty who makes his heart skip a beat. Prudence has unlocked an intense, unusual yearning in his soul. One that demands a permanent place in his life.

Unable to ignore lust, Prudence shares pieces of herself with the soul reaper. With each touch, Prudence and Shepherd fall deeper and deeper until their hearts want what the other tries to hide.

**Total Pages (Source):** 94

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

## Prologue

Melinda Thymes

The night before the human festival

Working for Fate was a tedious thing. Fate was incorrigible, demanding only the right future came to pass. Helping the Reapers who tried to stop the new destiny was also a daunting task. But Harvest tipped destiny's scales and created a terrible imbalance. Thanks to him, all mankind—along with our world—faced the pending apocalypse. A new outcome could arise at any moment. Or we could remain in the same gloomy, disastrous one.

Tucking my portal chip into my dress pocket, I strode forward as I took in the sight before me. It had been a long time since I'd ventured into the human world, but not much had changed. At least not in that spot. The approaching end wreaked havoc on a lot of spots in the world, but peace could still be found in a few places.

Not for much longer, I thought.

My gaze wandered over the barren street. Very few businesses were in the area. The only place occupied was across the road. Loud sounds emanated from the bar. As I approached, the door swung open and a cacophony of rock music, shouts, and slurs tumbled out with a drunken fool. The man smirked.

“You all right, ma'am? Think you're headed in the wrong place. This ain't a church.”

Undeterred by the young man's slurred words, I entered the bar. Laughter and stunned looks greeted me. I wasn't bothered. I came for a single reason, and it didn't take me long to find him.

With a pool stick in his right hand and a beer bottle in the other, Shepherd Donovan stood tall like a man who had no problems. Decades ago, in another lifetime, people called him Shep. He wasn't human, but a specter—a demonic shadow and paid assassin.

Three gremlins, invisible to humans, caused mayhem in the center of the table. One pressed his rump near Shepherd's opponent's stomach, a young man, and farted. The poor guy grimaced and asked who did it. The gremlin cackled mercilessly.

"Should I mess up his turn, Sire?" one of the nasty creatures asked Shepherd.

"I'll be disappointed if he needs help," the grumpier of the three said.

"Wallis is fucking the left corner again!" yelled the culprit who farted.

Wallis scurried away from the corner, hiding his face from Shepherd who tried hard to ignore the trio.

"I'm sorry, Sire," Wallis cried.

"Want me to kill him, Sire?" Grumpy asked.

I was so busy watching the gremlins' antics, I missed the end of the game. Shepherd must have won because the other guy started yelling. In a flash, Shepherd shoved the young man's face onto the table and pinned his hands behind him. "Pay and go. Or don't and see what happens."

After Shepherd released him, the man lowered his eyes and pulled out his wallet. He slapped a bill on the table and scurried away.

Shepherd took a swig of his beer.

“What a pussy.” Grumpy crossed his arms and huffed.

“Do I know you, witch?” Shepherd asked, not bothering to look my way.

So, he sensed me after all. I walked over to him.

“No, but we have a mutual acquaintance.” He cocked his head, waiting for me to continue. “The Grim Reaper.”

Shepherd’s body stiffened slightly before he laughed. “Did he finally decide I wasn’t worth saving?”

I clasped my hands together. “He doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Want me to gut her, Sire?” Grumpy asked, stepping to the edge of the pool table and glowering at me with yellow eyes.

Flicking my finger, the gremlin flew across the room and smacked into the wall.

“They talk big, but they’re harmless,” Shepherd said.

“They’re disgusting creatures.” I huffed. Why did he allow them to follow him around? “Haven’t you heard about what’s coming?”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“I live with humans and have nothing to do with the Underworld. But I’m sure you’re here to fill me in.” He leaned against the table and crossed his arms.

“The end.”

“Ah.” He squinted at me. “What’s that got to do with me?”

“It affects everyone,” I admonished. “Plus, you owe the Grim Reaper a debt.”

That was a lie. The Grim Reaper didn’t expect anything from the many lives he saved.

“So that’s what this is?” The soul reaper pinned me with a glare. “I didn’t ask Grim to spare me.”

“He did because you didn’t know what you were.”

“You don’t have to tell me about my life, witch. How would you know, anyway?”

“I see the past, the present, and the future.”

He retrieved the pool balls from the corner slot and returned them to the table.

“That’s why I know you’d love the chance to get that IOU off your shoulders. The Reapers are the only ones who can stop the apocalypse, but they need help. Do this, and your debt will be canceled.”

“By helping humanity?” He smirked. “Hell, I might like the world after the Devil takes over.”

There was another reason why Shepherd had to be at the human festival. Prudence and Shepherd had to meet. Once they did, my work was done. Love and attraction always did the rest.

“Don’t you have some family left? What was the name of the town?” His eyes narrowed. “You have a sister, right? Or was it a brother? The world the Devil creates won’t be a happy place for humans.”

“Are you threatening my master?” Wallis said bravely.

“No. I’m here to warn him about what’s coming and get his help.”

I tossed a portal chip on the pool table, and a gremlin snatched it up.

“I haven’t seen one of these in years,” the creature beamed, yellow teeth peeking from beneath his thin veiny lips.

“Can you take us to visit?” another asked.

“Drop it,” Shepherd said. The putrid thing listened, and the device clunked to the table.

“If you want to help, come to the City of the Dead tomorrow night.” I lifted my long skirt. “An ugly, dangerous tradition is scheduled. Grim and his Reapers will be there to stop it from happening.”

“Why are you telling me?” Shepherd asked. His furrowed gaze went to the portal chip as his jaw tightened.

“Think of it as a wonderful way to help the world out while getting rid of that pesky debt,” I said and departed.

Images of his encounter with Prudence entered my mind, letting me know he’d go. Matchmaking was tedious but very rewarding.

One

Shepherd

The night of the human festival

Shuffling the deck of cards, I watched Wallis tiptoe over to his stuffed animal. The gremlin looked left and then right before glancing at me. Quickly, I dropped my head and focused on the cards, but I could still see him out of the corner of my eye. When he thought I wasn’t paying attention, he shoved down the pants I made him wear and plunged his pencil dick into the worn hole within the doll.

“Wallis,” I said calmly. “If you’re going to fuck your doll, don’t do it in the living room.”

The twelve-inch green demon pulled up his pants and lowered his gaze. “I’m sorry, Sire.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Sire.

I winced. I'd never get used to the title. Apparently, it was common for gremlins to find a master to boss them around. Considering I spent the first two decades of my life believing I was nothing more than human, I couldn't get used to the custom.

"Wallis." I warned.

"I mean, Boss. Sorry."

No, he wasn't. I hated being called boss just as much.

"You are our sire. Why would we call you anything else?" Dirk, the grumpiest of the three gremlins, asked. He refused to call me anything other than sire.

"Don't you three get tired of following me around?" I griped.

It was a game we had played for decades. I'd tell them to stop trailing behind me, but they wouldn't listen. When they first entered my life, I meant what I said. Over the years, however, the ugly creatures grew on me, and the words were empty.

"Because of your human ways?" Marty, the biggest prankster of the three, asked.

I sighed, not bothering to answer.

"You need to let go of this world," Dirk muttered and crossed his arms.

The gremlins longed to live in their Underworld, but because they wouldn't leave my side, they were stuck in the human world.

"You don't belong here," Dirk added.

"I can't stand demons." I tossed the cards on the coffee table, and they scattered. "I like peace. You know that."

"Here we go again." Dirk exhaled. "You are a demon."

I know.

If I'd been human, I would have died a long time ago—sixty years to be exact. That hadn't been my fate. Instead, I was alive and sire to three ugly creatures.

What would you think of your brother now, Tiffany?

Not that her opinion mattered. My sister believed I died in a motorcycle wreck. Since then, she'd aged, married, had kids, and grandkids while I remained unchanged—just a gruesome specter feeding on souls to survive. The same brother who visited her from the shadows and made sure she was doing all right. Although she no longer needed me, I didn't stop needing her. She was all I had left tethering me to humanity, but three gremlins constantly reminded me I wasn't human.

"I might devour souls, but I'm not like those in the Underworld," I blurted out.

"One day you'll listen. One day you'll know your place is most certainly not here," Dirk gestured at the rundown motor home we lived in. As a paid assassin, I could afford a life of luxury, but I felt most comfortable in a trailer similar to the dump I grew up in with Tiffany.

I knew where my head was. I wasn't—I'm not—ready to change. My appetite, body, strength, and immortality were different. But giving up my humanity? That meant becoming a monster—something I wasn't ready for.

I was stubborn. Really fucking stubborn. I'd been denying those little shits for decades. There wasn't anything—or anyone—that would change my ways. I could continue rejecting their ways for centuries.

If I decided to live that long.

Pulling a cigarette from the pack on the table, I lit it and leaned back against the sofa cushion. I blew out a smoke ring, and Marty said, "Are you going to the human festival?"

"Ain't got nothing to do with me," I said, inhaling more smoke. What did it matter? My body didn't succumb to sickness and disease the way humans did.

"It's been years since I heard of the festival," Marty murmured with a slight irksome thrill in his voice.

The witch, Melinda, had made it clear the festival was a twisted tradition that had to be stopped. So why was the shithead looking all dreamy, as if he were thinking of a faraway place? "Should I kill you, Marty?"

He turned his gaze to me and quickly bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Sire—I mean, Boss. I know what's allowed and not allowed. The festival is a horrid thing, but if it's the beginning of the end... What if such a thing reaches this world?"

"Like I said, ain't got nothing to do with me," I said more sternly.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“The disease and strange happenings in the human world are evidence it’s coming,” Dirk muttered. “In time, the darkness will reach every corner of both worlds.”

I gritted my teeth before shoving the cigarette between my lips and inhaling sharply. Dirk watched me with his beady beige eyes and smirked the second I stood. If he kept it up, I would shove his ass in the trash can.

Smug demon.

“Where are you going?” Wallis asked as he followed me, dragging his doll behind him.

“To the store.”

“Yes! I need more Fruity Pebbles,” said Marty.

“No. You’re all staying here.”

“Try not to get lost down there,” Dirk added.

I ignored him.

For a nasty gremlin, he always seemed to know my every move.

---

It had been a long time since I’d been to the City of the Dead. On my first trip, I met

a warlock who offered to escort me to the Underworld. Within five minutes, I knew my curiosity had been a mistake. I didn't belong there. Considering it took me a decade to get used to my own reaping form, the sights I saw weren't anything I'd ever get used to.

Humanlike men and women sporting tentacles, multiple eyes, and rows and rows of pointy teeth. Everything from ogres to banshees—and of course gremlins—occupied the territory.

That was how I'd met Wallis, Dirk, and Marty.

Wallis humped a dead demon in the middle of the street, and I almost tripped over them. The putrid creature hammered his miniscule hips into the deceased's open mouth. I couldn't forget the vacant stare on the dead male's face. Wallis's actions were so disgusting that I grabbed him by the neck and squeezed. The ugly creature looked into my eyes and instead of screaming, he flashed his jagged black-spotted teeth and smiled. "Sire, I've found you at last."

"Finally." Dirk, perched on a windowsill watching Wallis, jumped down and lumbered toward us. With his arms crossed and narrowed gaze, I assumed he was their leader. "We've been waiting a long time for you to find us."

"Master!" Marty ran out of a shop, threw himself to the ground, and bowed at my feet.

I had been so confused by their responses I dropped Wallis to the ground.

And the rest was history...

No matter how much I threatened or left them somewhere—I tried hundreds of times—they always, always found their way back to me. According to them, a bond

formed when we met. The connection enabled them to find me no matter where I went.

For some strange reason, no matter how frustrated I got, I couldn't kill them either. The nasty fiends probably put some sort of hex on me the night we met. Why else hadn't I killed Wallis whenever he did something disgusting? It was my fucking luck to be the type of demon who had a twisted association with such creatures.

Something was off about the City of the Dead. Unlike my last visit, it was completely empty. Normally, the place bustled with demons covered with boils and other hideous creatures.

But the streets were barren. With each step I took, my brows furrowed. Where was everyone? Did I get the wrong place? How many cities were in the Underworld?

I continued walking until my leg plunged into a cool, tingly puddle. Magic. Glancing down, a ripple formed and spread around me. The shops and streets undulated, and I got a glimpse of commotion. A barrier.

Straightening my shoulders, I stepped through the hole and froze as the town surfaced. My body locked up, and every creature's action looked sluggish as if time had slowed while blood roared in my ears. My brain needed time to process the shit show before me.

Clenching my fists, my heart hammered as my eyes darted everywhere. I didn't know what the fuck to focus on first.

Correction.

I didn't know who to eat first.

Screams pierced my ears as a human woman fell to her knees in front of several hellhounds. The unusual beasts resembled werewolves with rat-like faces, sparse fur, and knees bent backward. They surrounded her, pumping their dicks in their palms.

Beside them were three huge ogres tearing at another human's clothes.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Creatures, shoulder to shoulder, jammed the streets. Every type of demon indulged in heinous sexual acts.

My skin shimmered, and my pulse synced with black dots pulsating in my vision. One... Two... I blinked and my arm faded into a cloud of smoke. The vapor expanded, and my human form was left behind. I was a soul reaper. An inky miasma without form or substance.

Anger vibrated through me as I glanced around and saw women screaming and running. What I saw that night would stay with me forever. Fury mixed with hunger fueled me. Vengeance for the lives taken by the demons would be delivered.

I wasn't innocent. My existence was filled with regrets and loathing. But that night I'd make use of what I was and devour the wicked. I came with one purpose—protecting my sister's life from being affected by the end. Seeing the degradation, however, gave me more reasons to act.

Rage filled my heart as I swooped in. Before the hounds had time to blink, I slipped through their bodies and claimed their souls. I tasted their lust and wickedness. Their depravity made my form expand.

Delicious.

Long ago, I discovered that the more deceitful and vicious a person was, the better their soul tasted. It kept me away from those who were earnest and good.

Bodies, hitting the ground with a sickening thud, fell around me as I inhaled. Being a

soul reaper had a distinct advantage. We simply had to pass through a person's body and breathe. No tools or weapons required.

In thirty seconds, I had devoured thirty souls.

"Soul reaper!" someone screamed.

Ah, they finally noticed the bodies piling up on the concrete. Not that it mattered.

A soul was untouchable unless that person also worked in death—aka Reapers. My kind were considered vicious and hunted by the likes of the same Grim Reaper who spared me decades prior.

Demons scattered and broke away from their groups. Humans, tossed to the ground, were trampled by the fiends rushing to get out of my path.

Quickly, I zipped through the monsters. I lost track of the passing seconds and minutes as bodies amassed behind me and my anger and lust for souls intensified.

Eating so many at once made me lightheaded. I felt like I could touch the sky. No one could stop me. I wanted more. The last time I'd been so damned high was as a human.

I should have stopped. When my form behaved like an electrical wave, I had to be careful not to slip through a human.

But I didn't cease.

I kept pushing and pushing through the monsters. When I looked at the bodies lying around, I thought I'd gorged on all the demon souls. But every time I turned a corner, there were hundreds more demons doing despicable things to humans.

My hunger grew tenfold. The only thing these types of souls were good for was devouring. They deserved my wrath.

I tore through the City of the Dead, vanquishing souls left and right. But there was so much land and too many demons filling it. I lost myself in a delicious binge.

Then I saw her. A raven-haired beauty in a black dress that ignited a different type of hunger. One that feasting on souls wouldn't satiate.

I froze despite the boiled-covered demon darting in front of me. My shadowy mass quivered. If I had been solid...

What would I have done?

Words escaped me. Without knowing what ailed me, I didn't know the proper response.

But I couldn't tear my gaze from the woman.

She mesmerized me. Sexiness oozed from the tip of her head down to her black high heels. The blood moon reflected off her exposed pale back. A gown speckled by diamonds hugged her every curve. Few could pull off such a dark and sensual aura, but she basked in it as if the night was hers for the taking. Her breathtaking and eerie image would have sent the strongest man to his knees.

Something pulled at my chest as if a magnetic force yanked on my soul. Her aura locked me in place, like she controlled every part of me. She hadn't even looked at me, but yet I was changing on the inside. Becoming someone else.

Somethingelse.

A machete materialized in her hand, and she hacked into a demon approaching her. My form quivered again as I watched her move. Then her striking blue eyes turned toward me, and something inside me sparked. Whatever it was, filled me with awe and something else I couldn't describe.

With a hand on her hip, she sashayed over to me. Fire engulfed me. My soul undulated in response. Without warning, she lifted her machete, and it became a sword.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

My reaping form rippled. What the—An odd web of lust took root inside me, making my head foggy. I should have moved aside. Instead, I wanted to bask in her presence despite the danger.

Am I going to die?

I'd been waiting such a long time for death to finally claim me, but it didn't appeal to me in that moment.

I can't move.

Strange.

The idea of leaving her became appalling.

I could survive that blade in this form. Just come closer.

Her eyes narrowed as I stayed put. I studied the enormous pink aura flowing around her. If I had a mouth in that form, I would salivate.

What the fuck?

Goodness vibrated throughout her soul. She glowed with it. Why did I yearn to devour her? Good souls tasted bad. Bad souls tasted good. That was how it was for soul reapers.

Then a chill wafted off of her in waves. I studied her soul again. She

was immortal—a Reaper. It was second nature to a demon to recognize a threat like her kind. The goodness within her made sense. It was her job.

I wasn't afraid of what she was. Her existence, however, completely stunned me. I wanted to fucking hump her leg. Then buy her flowers because I'd feel shitty afterward for such wolf-like behavior. But I probably needed to put her in a cellar so no one else would see her and want to do the same things. How many had already? My rage simmered deeply. How many would I have to kill?

So many thoughts jumbled my brain. If I was a machine, I'd blow a fuse.

She stopped several feet in front of me and stiffened. Cocking her head, she glanced beyond my shadowy form. Perhaps she intended to end me like the other foul beasts slain that night. Her intense scrutiny made my shadow sway. Her hypnotic aura spreading through my form threatened to solidify me.

I inhaled and caught the scent of a familiar candy—green-apple Jolly Rancher with a hint of rum. She smelled like the sweet treat too. Her looks gave a man a reason to fall to his knees and give praise. My feet itched to move and meet her the rest of the way.

Before I could, a sword hovered at my neck. Side-glancing to my left, I saw the new arrivals. Two more male Reapers. Of course they traveled in a group.

“Ah, so this is where the trail of dead bodies is coming from,” said the one holding a shotgun. Both dark-haired males were dressed in tuxedos.

“Soul Reaper,” shotgun guy shouted.

“And the reason for all the missing, angry souls.” The other one chuckled. A yellow essence wrapped around him. I looked at the sword free-floating at my neck and

noticed the same color swirling around it. Mysteriously, the weapon seemed to have a mind of its own. “You’re not afraid of dying?”

I tensed as the blade nipped my skin. Normally, I wouldn’t care about my fate since Tiffany no longer needed me, but the mysterious woman flashed through my mind.

“Even if I don’t, you’re the only ones with the power to kill me,” I said.

“What are you doing?” Shotgun Reaper asked, lowering his weapon.

“It appears you guys needed some help.” I wasn’t about to bring up my debt to the Grim Reaper or the visit from the strange witch. That was my business.

“Help from a soul reaper,” Yellow Essence muttered. He scanned the area before adding, “The world really is ending.” Lifting his hand, the sword flew into his palm, and he disappeared.

The remaining male watched me carefully. “I sense no human death on you tonight. Don’t make me regret not killing you.” And then, like his buddy, he ported too.

My focus switched to where the woman had been. She wasn’t there. Instead, dozens of purple petals swirled on the ground.

A bottomless ache churned the pit of my stomach.

Where did the fucking flowers come from?

Two

Prudence

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Seven days after the human festival

“Since Harvest is targeting my daughters, I won’t take any chances.” Dad’s dark essence flared around him. “None of your sisters are to be left alone. Each of you will have protectors.”

“Dad!” I whined and then realized I showed emotion. “We can handle ourselves.”

“I agree,” Maureen muttered.

“I know you’re all-powerful, but having help is a benefit.” Dad’s gaze flicked to me. “With Jackal around, the Harvesters might hesitate before going after Maureen.”

“Are you saying I don’t get a bodyguard?” Maureen smirked.

“For now. That changes if you’re attacked.”

What the hell?

I tightened my fists, having a hard time controlling the emotions I fought so hard to keep buried. It was unfair that Maureen got away from this mess because she had a soulmate. Absolutely absurd!

“I’ll find people for Joy, Prudence, and Kitty. Until we set everything up, the three of you will stay at the castle...”

I closed my eyes and sighed. It wasn’t the best time to think about the previous

night's conversation. But it was impossible not to think of what led up to my current dilemma.

“For the love of—”

Cutting myself off mid-sentence, I could feel Payne's stare on my back as I whirled around. His dark eyes widened, and he froze as I snarled.

Breathe, Prudence.

I had no choice but to relax. I restrained my sin by repressing my passions. In that moment, Payne's invasion of my privacy fueled my anger—a massive emotion I couldn't ignore, although I desperately wanted to. Feelings became power for my sin and that always led to fatigue.

The best way to manage the curse of Lust was staying neutral, which meant keeping myself in check. Because everything, every-fucking-thing, led to desire. Get mad? Boom. Horny as hell. Get sad? I wanted to hump something. Happy? Good God, please hide the men. Something about my pheromones did a number on men. Even staying calm was exhausting thanks to my affliction.

Every second of every day, my brain thought about fucking.

I was itching for relief like an addict needing a fix. My skin tingled. My panties were soaked. It had been a week since the human festival, and I couldn't fulfill my needs because my family and Payne wouldn't go away.

Dangerous.

I walked a tightrope. My body was so wired I could no longer hide my thoughts and feelings.

“Do you have to hover?” I asked, noticing his wide chest.

Ewww.

Facepalming, I closed my eyes. Payne was a very attractive guy, but he was like a brother to me. Besides, he wasn't available. Actually, he'd never been available. But I was the only one who knew his secret.

“I'm not hovering,” he said, turning and plucking a dagger out of a dead ogre's chest.

We'd been to several places in the Underworld descending evil souls. Wickedness took all forms, and the ogres Payne destroyed were no different. Work never stopped, even after the slaughtering all the demons during the human festival. The world ending was to blame for everything, including my lack of solitude.

“You know what's funny?” His goading tone let me know it wouldn't really be funny to me. “We work with each other every day, but the second it becomes about protecting you—”

“Everyone likes privacy,” I interrupted. “Especially you. Hell, you moved away from everyone well over a hundred years ago.”

He gritted his teeth briefly. “Don't do that. I'm not the one in danger. Harvest is after one of you.”

“I know the risks,” I huffed as I smoothed out my slightly wrinkled cloak. Payne and I had been fighting demons all day while I struggled with another inner battle all on my own. The level of demon activity was increasing, which was expected with the pending apocalypse.

Most of the ugly ass demons had cowered for centuries, but suddenly they were

willing to die for an existence they thought they deserved. We hadn't come across anymore Harvester activity, though, since the festival. It was too soon to tell if that was bad or fucking awful. Who knew what Harvest planned? Why did it seem to include me or one of my sisters?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Payne scowled. “Your cursed siblings are too stubborn for your own good sometimes.”

“You’re one to talk.” I met his scowl. Payne flinched and glanced away. “I’m not the one you want to protect.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he stated.

“You might have my family fooled, but not me.”

“Prudence,” he warned. “Don’t. You’re not the only one with issues at the moment.” For a second, I thought I saw smoke—actual fucking smoke—coming from his nostrils.

I blinked. Maybe I imagined it. Shaking my head, I said, “I hope you figure your shit out, Payne. She won’t always be waiting for you.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” A murky shadow moved across his eyes, blackening them completely.

His words made me think of that one time I was desperate enough to slip into his dreams. I indulged my lust by feeding off people’s sexual fantasies. Payne had been the closest man around me. If I did nothing, Lust would turn me into a wanton mess prowling the City of the Dead and sleeping with anything available.

But that night, I hadn’t been able to siphon any desire from his dream. He created his own fantasy I had no control over. And it surprised mewhowas in the dream with

him. I thought he loathed Joy's affections, but the way Payne crushed the dream Joy into his chest and kiss her proved me wrong.

Then the nightmare began. Joy started screaming shortly after the kiss. Flames engulfed her lips as Joy and Payne pulled away from each other, and her body went up in smoke. I didn't see much else because he jolted awake.

"You're right. I don't, but I know the most important part." Something told me that Payne still cared for Joy on some level.

He turned his back on me.

Another tingle of lust consumed me. When Payne opened the passage to Hell, I rubbed my thighs together and bit back a whimper as my panties rubbed against my clit. Oh, shit! I'd put my body through the ringer since the human festival with no relief. Did my family not understand I had to do something before I lost my mind to Lust and attacked someone?

Payne focused on sending the evil souls through the passage. It could be my chance to fade and find relief.

"Don't even think about it," he said.

I clenched my teeth. "I'll neuter you," I promised. When he ignored me, I pleaded, "It's not an option for me. I have to go."

He pinched a black soul with his finger and shoved it into the passage. "Call Maureen. She goes with you. If not, it's me. And neither of us wants that while you're doing your thing." He didn't even know what my thing was. None of them did. I was sure they all thought I slept with everything coming and going.

Not true.

I was still a virgin.

---

No way would I call Maureen. Her pride would be too much to handle. I was jittery and on edge. It had been a long time since I'd felt so out of sorts. I was so used to embracing calmness that my senses went haywire.

I squinted at the flashing lights hanging from the bar Kitty and I were in.

Yes, I called Kitty. If anyone could chill out and eat while I slipped into someone's head, it would be her. Besides, the Reapers Dad assigned to watch over her stood at a distance against the wall, ready to defend us if Harvest showed up. Payne, however, hovered like an overbearing brother.

"You okay?" Kitty frowned as she shoved a fry into her mouth.

I lowered my eyes and glanced at my untouched drink. Grimacing, I said, "Sorry, I called you out. I'm at my limit."

"Hey, it's fine. Your emotions have been on display for the last three days," she said nonchalantly.

My pulse spiked. "W-what?"

"You want to conceal them, right?" Kitty lifted a brow and smiled. "You haven't had time to satisfy your sin with Dad siccing the hounds on us. There's more than the two here, just so you know."

Shit. I hadn't noticed. Was my curse affecting my other senses? I had to do something.Soon.

“It helps to remain impassive,” I explained. “Lust is a lot more dormant—”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“But it’s impossible to do that when you’ve gone too long without it, right?” she guessed.

I nodded slowly and rubbed my temple. “I’m exhausted.” And horny. Being so wound up drained me.

“I can keep them busy for a bit while you sneak off...” Kitty let her words drift off as she winked.

“I don’t need that. Just sit right here and keep an eye on me.” Her nose wrinkled, and I rolled my eyes. “I enter their dreams and satisfy my lust within people’s fantasies.”

“How the hell do you do that?” she asked.

“Dad was an incubus demon before becoming the Grim Reaper, remember? Incubi can enter the dreams of others. We inherited the ability to dream-walk from him.” It was still weird to think Dad used to be two separate individuals before he merged and became one with the skeletal monster known as the Grim Reaper.

Her mouth curved into an O before she grinned. “You’re sneaky. I can’t believe I haven’t tried to enter someone’s dream.”

A wave of desire rolled over me. I squeezed my thighs together as my clit throbbed. “I need to get this over with. Okay?”

“Then you can go back to being the ice queen?” Kitty asked. “I kind of like you honest and open like this.” I frowned, and she bumped my shoulder. “But I get it. I

really do, sis. Whatever makes your curse easier to handle.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and tried to ignore the tightness in my chest.

Turning on the stool, I scoured the crowd in search of someone to serve my purpose. Skipping the dance floor, I didn’t want to put someone to sleep in the middle of dancing, and searched the booths in the darkened corners. A tall, handsome vamp caught my eye, but the fact that he was already looking at me was a hard pass. I didn’t want anyone chasing after me in the real world—or in a dream—because of a hot fantasy. I skipped the next booth because of the two ogres in it. Yuck!

The third booth was my winner. A tiny female sat on the lap of an oversized werewolf. I shuddered, liking the idea of feeling small. He grabbed the collar of her shirt and ripped it down the middle. I couldn’t see her breasts, but I saw the moment his claws went toward them.

Okay.

They were about to screw each other, anyway. I wouldn’t feel guilty for sending them into a dreamworld. Since they were together, I’d need to put them both asleep. Focusing, I sent out a little power. Immediately, the woman slumped against his chest. The male attempted to shake off the sudden tiredness, but his head fell back against the booth.

Propping my arms on the bar, I laid down my head and closed my eyes.

---

Even in someone else’s dream, I was always in total control. I could set the scene any way I preferred. Dark colors were my favorite, so I gave them a black canopy bed with black satin sheets and pillows. The man was no longer a werewolf. He took the

form of a handsome man with black hair and a thick beard, but he still dwarfed the female.

He dropped her on the bed, and she giggled. Their potent and musky lust filled the air. My pussy clenched in need, craving what I always denied myself. A man. Correction. A man's cock.

Lust might hate it, but she survived on what I gave her. It wasn't that I wanted to be a voyeur, but anything was better than losing my choice. Lust didn't care about my virginity, my feelings, or what I wanted. Or more accurately, who I wanted. It wanted me to fuck everyone in sight.

As a kid, it wasn't so bad. I always had an overwhelming need to rub my clit. I didn't know at the time that I was giving myself orgasms, but it always made the ache in my body disappear for a little while. Then I hit fifteen and everything worsened. My needs became more demanding. I masturbated every thirty minutes, but the desire only intensified, leaving me empty. The throbbing between my legs was a constant reminder there was a space needing to be filled.

One day, an older Reaper stopped by the house. It was the first time I wanted to touch someone other than myself, but I didn't realize it was lust awakening. When I rubbed myself against him, the man flustered and tried to gently push me away. Too horny to take no for an answer, I raised my leg and tried to straddle him. As I rubbed my damp panties against his thigh, his eyes hazed over, and he didn't push me away again. Lust took over. The stranger allowed me to grind myself into an orgasmic frenzy.

Immediately after, I realized what I'd done and ran to my room crying. I promised myself never to endure that type of embarrassment again. That old Reaper retired and never came back to the house. I'd been mortified, but glad I didn't have to see him again. Plus, he hadn't told my dad. If he did, Dad never confronted me about it.

Back then, lust was easily quenched. It would take a few months before she'd want more from me. Then I began my research, discovering different ways to get the one thing I thought about nonstop. I also learned what kind of demon my father had been, and how to use the knowledge to my advantage.

I was no different from a succubus feeding on a person's desires. I might not have the choice in thinking or craving sexual intercourse, but I could make sure I didn't give someone my body against my will. As long as I kept my mind from becoming cloudy and my needs from making me into a crazed sex zombie, I didn't have to worry, which was why I asked Kitty to come with me. Her presence kept me from slipping up and seeking out a male.

Back to the dream...

The woman was naked beneath the werewolf. Skipping foreplay, he lifted her leg over his shoulder. I let them lead since I was too wired and needy to pick what I wanted them to do. With his free hand, he aligned his dick with her pussy and thrust inside. She moaned loudly, and her back arched off the bed. My curse conceived pleasure as a mist—a substance I could steal. Their desire seeped from their bodies like a red fog. My pussy clenched. My body always wanted to be filled, but this would get the job done—even if I still felt hollow. Shaking, I pressed my legs together and rubbed as hard as I could. My essence rose above me, then absorbed the red haze hovering over the couple. A circle of pink whirled above them, soaking up their desire until all that was left was a trace of vapors.

Finally...

I took a deep breath and waited for the pounding in my clit to subside. A fierce wave of lust hit me instead. I bent over and held my stomach, biting my bottom lip to keep from whimpering. Oh, God. What? Normally, relief was instant the second I absorbed their passions.

It'd been a while. It's okay. Once one of them reached their climax, I'd steal it for my own. Then I'd be back to wrapping myself in the armor I protected myself in.

Raising my head, I watched as he fucked her mercilessly. Her boobs jiggled shamelessly, and she cried out as he thrust and then roared as he came.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

I stood and dragged myself over to them. His release turned into the same mist the woman's desire had produced. My curse rose, ready to claim it for her own. She swept over them and took it all. I closed my eyes, waiting for relief. My pussy throbbed, my breasts were heavy, and I felt so empty I could cry. There was no relief. My eyes popped open as the panic set in.

"No, no, no," I chanted.

"What the—" The werewolf yelled at my unexpected appearance before I pushed them both out of the dream. Their bodies slowly dissolved until I was alone. I sank to my knees and rubbed my thighs together.

"No, please," I whispered as I tried to focus. "Wait, shit!" The haze my curse caused was already happening. I wasn't thinking logically. I should have kept them here with me and made them fuck until it satisfied lust.

My heart raced and my mouth felt like sandpaper. I glanced around at my empty dreamscape where I should have been sated.

No, no, no.

Please.

No release came.

When masturbating stopped being enough, I went through a similar experience. Was my curse evolving again? I had done anything and everything in the dream world. I'd

watched and produced many orgies to steal passions. But I wouldn't let lust give my body to someone just to satisfy itself. It was my choice—mine—who I wanted to be with. It was why I hadn't slept with anyone. Getting to know someone wasn't possible while I was obsessed with sex.

Love wasn't in the cards for me. Not that I cared. Much.

Being bound to someone forever?

I'd rather not.

I was already stuck with a sin that tried to control every aspect of my life. The idea of Lust becoming infatuated with someone made me want to crawl into a hole and never come out. I rubbed my chest as a sharp stabbing pain coursed through me.

That's not the reason, I told myself. I just need more.

I shook my head and tried hard not to think of him. I panted, slipping my hand in my pants to rub my clit even though it wouldn't help. A shadow appeared in front of me. Glancing up, I took in the massive black, shadowy form. Lust sparked, and I whimpered.

Soul Reaper.

Not just any soul reaper.

I recognized that hulking soul because he'd plagued my dreams since the human festival. He wasn't real. Only an illusion I created, but it was enough.

In all the years I'd been alive, lust had never craved a single person. She wanted everyone. Until then.

Why a fucking soul reaper?

The very moment I spotted him in The City of the Dead, I felt it.

The doom.

The burning.

The yearning.

An intense need that went beyond anything I could comprehend.

It was why I rushed away from the demon before he could say a single word and possibly seal our fate. I didn't want to know his name, but one look at him and I knew.

If I wanted to keep my head, I had to visit Shepherd's dreams. Maybe then I could quell the ache he'd created in me.

For real.

Three

Shepherd

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

She's sitting in a booth at Mino's Bar, a location just outside the limits of the City of the Dead...

I shouldn't have a certain person's whereabouts stuck in my fucking head all the damned time. My hands shook as I tried to ignore the goose bumps, like the ghost of someone's touch, rippling over my body.

Aligning my pool stick with the cue ball, I hit it at an angle, and it bounced off the corner. The ball smacked straight into the three others like I wanted, but only two of them went into the slot.

Standing tall, I tugged at my collar and pulled the shirt from my damp skin. Moisture covered me unlike anything I'd ever experienced. I'd been sweating for days. Running my hand through my damp hair, I strode over to the other side of the pool table and aligned my stick with the cue ball again.

Getting that last one into the hole became a priority. I concentrated as hard as I could on the outcome, but still missed it completely thanks to a single, mysterious woman consuming my thoughts. I yearned for her with a passion that began in the depths of my soul. The craving made my heart pound and blood rush to my cock. The intensity pushed me to find her.

Who was she?

I didn't know her name, but I was fucking positive I knew where to find the black-haired beauty. Her location came to me hours after I encountered her at the human festival. It wasn't by scent because I no longer smelled the candied goodness wafting

off her, and I missed it.

No, something deeper, more primal enabled me to find her. My soul knew exactly where she was at all times. All I had to do was think about her, and she'd be there. It was like I was connected to her.

It amazed me that someone I'd only seen once and never spoke to could burrow herself so deeply beneath my skin. My explanation? Madness—the mindless obsession that eventually possesses all demons.

Then the sweats came along with the urge to go to her. My feet had a mind of their own, always trying to seek her out.

I couldn't sleep. I hadn't eaten since the human festival, not that I needed to with all the souls I devoured that night. My thoughts were consumed by the stranger. I knew—I fucking knew—something came undone within me when I saw her. A monster tugged at his leash and my human part stomped his boots to stay away from whatever hell was about to break loose.

Why was I fighting desire? The woman I saw was perfection—a goddess. All of me—the demon and whatever was left of my humanity—ached to know her. I'd forgotten what wanting someone felt like, and it burned so good.

“Should we make something out of Sire's fallen petals?” Wallis asked.

Gritting my teeth, I tried not to eavesdrop.

“Maybe we should tape them back together and make a bouquet for his funeral since he's obviously dying,” Marty snorted. He hopped onto the pool table and looked up at me. His shoulders slumped, and he stuck out his chapped bottom lip. “I can't believe you let Dirk take the portal chip and enter the Underworld. How is that fair? We

should have gone with him.”

Without thinking, I backhanded Marty. He sailed across the room and collided with a table. Beer bottles clattered and crashed to the floor. The men jumped up, yelling, and pointed to their drenched shirts.

“What the fuck?” someone said.

“How did that happen?” said another.

The third guy scratched beneath his beard and asked, “Did someone throw something?”

I stopped focusing on the upset bystanders and glanced down at my hands. The veins at my wrist practically twitched while my heart hammered in my chest. Why was I so angry? I needed to let loose on something or someone. As Marty climbed back onto the table, I eyeballed him. Wallis soon joined him. The two green fools tilted their heads as if they were trying to figure out my problem.

“Are you okay?” I asked Marty.

He nodded. “Boss, you...”

“What?”

“You reacted more like a soul reaper than—”

“Don’t say another word!” I warned him as I stood tall. That only seemed to make the gremlins giddier. Wallis and Marty glanced at each other, shared a devious smirk, and bounced up and down with their excitement.

“You’re so cool, Boss.” Wallis clapped.

I rubbed my forehead. Yelling and ordering them around wasn’t cool. I would never understand those creatures. “Stop clapping.”

---

There was a reason I let Dirk venture into the Underworld alone. I needed answers. All day long, Wallis swept up the purple petals appearing at my feet. Sometimes, I awakened, and I was lying in dead flowers. They were everywhere I turned. Rubbing my bare chest, I sat on the too short mattress. The shitty trailer didn’t give me enough room for a longer bed.

Although I took a cold shower five minutes ago, I was still turned on.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Grim's woods.

Grim's castle.

Alone in a room.

Damn it!

If one of the gremlins left, I couldn't pinpoint their location. When they returned, they would tell me where they had been. That wasn't the case with the mysterious woman. Why?

Strange ideas consumed me.

She needs me.

I needed to soothe her pain. Maybe that was the reason my body felt primed. I'd give her whatever she needed if that would appease the scorching heat under my skin.

What if it wasn't about her? What if it was just my demon DNA wanting to eat her soul?

When I began salivating, I clapped a hand over my mouth. Thinking of her sweet-smelling pink soul captivated me.

Really fucking nice, Shepherd.

Drool dripped onto my chest. I swiped at it leisurely, then something on my right pec caught my eye. Amid the black ink, like a blaring neon sign, was the tattoo of a pink goat. The damn thing looked like someone etched a cartoon character on my skin. Where the hell did that come from?

Melinda must have hexed me. Ever since the night the witch told me about the Reapers needing help, I'd been messed up. Was she responsible for the mysterious woman invading my dreams too?

The raven-haired beauty, dressed in the black gown, never spoke. She always stood at a distance as if she waited for me. The woman was a beacon beckoning me, but I never answered her call. Somehow, I knew my brain conjured what I wished to see. I shouldn't be obsessing over the creature with indigo eyes.

Even more illogical was the desire constantly growing beneath my skin. Maybe if I found her and gave into my passions, the inferno inside me would cease. Not possible. Seeing her would inevitably make me worse. Until I knew what was happening with me, I needed to stay away from her.

Dirk had been gone half a day. It was too long. I needed answers to my dilemma the second I locked eyes with the female Reaper.

I shouldn't have gotten mixed up in Grim's problems. His Reapers appeared to handle the human festival just fine on their own. Why did the witch want me there that night? To hex me? Kill me? By the constant bulge in my jeans, maybe it wasn't a physical death she conjured up. More like a sweaty and constantly horny torture that included dropping petals like a wilting flower. What the hell did I do to piss off a witch?

Suddenly, the room spun. The walls stretched and moved around me and dizziness took over. Swallowing the bile rising in my throat, I tilted my head, but it didn't help.

Darkness cascaded over me, and suddenly everything was far away. I reached for the nightstand. The harder I tried to touch it, the smaller it became. More troubling was the fatigue crashing down on me. Trying to keep my watery eyes open, I collapsed on the mattress and darkness won.

Hands trailed up my chest and pulled me out of my sleep. Bolting upright, I glanced around the dark room. How long had I been out? The sheets covering my lower half were black.

Wait! I'm naked.

What the hell?

A pink manicured hand slid up my abs. Who touched me?

Last thing I remembered was dizziness, and then I passed out. So, how did I get here? Wherever the fuck that is.

I drew in a deep breath. Green apple and rum. Her scent was everywhere. I fell back onto the bed and groaned. Heat pressed down on me like a weighted blanket. Fuck. I had no clue why I'd been so horny lately. In that moment, however, the room and her presence overwhelmed me.

Raising my head, I saw the woman right as her nails trailed up my chest. The sheet slipped down my hips as a naked blonde, someone I didn't recognize, kissed my abdomen. I glared at the vixen. She just grinned up at me and grabbed my stiff cock through the sheet. Her blue gaze seemed to sparkle. Not the blues I'd been obsessing over. Nothing about her called to the desire stirring in my abdomen. The woman's presence disturbed the true reason I was painfully hard.

The raven-haired beauty was close by. I just had to find her.

I inhaled again, eyes rolling back at the intoxicating aroma, and pushed the blonde off of me. She stumbled slightly, and her giant tits jiggled.

“What’s wrong?” She batted her lashes.

My gaze lingered on her for a moment. I could easily pin her down and take what she offered. My cock jolted at the thought of relief, but I could give zero fucks about her. I only wanted the one who had driven me mad for the last week. I trembled, knowing she was there with me. I was a demon obsessed with someone I had yet to touch. Fuck! Who is my mysterious woman?

“You need this. We need this.” The blonde purred. When she tried to climb on top of me again, I got out of the bed.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“What is this place?” I asked.

Turning in circles, I didn’t see a door. A hand slid up my arm. Sighing, I grabbed her wrist, and she whined. “Where is she?”

The woman pouted. “Where’s who?”

Then I saw the glimmer on her shoulder.

“What are you waiting for?” She traced her fingers up her ribs before caressing her left breast.

Wait! I looked around the room again. That was it. It was just a room. No! It was a place—a small world of someone else’s making, and they put me inside it. Maybe a dream? It would explain why I passed out the way I did. If this was my dream, then the blonde would be taller with black hair and eyes that could cut me down with their coldness. Why did I smell the mystery woman?

Unless...

I studied the blonde. Everything about her was meant to entice—oversized breasts, curves for days, long and curly hair, and bright eyes done up in dark makeup. If I hadn’t seen the woman at the human festival, I would have fucked the blonde. But now... A hundred women could stand before me, and I’d only think of one.

“You’re not real,” I said.

I slipped right through the blonde in search of the specter in the shadows. Funny thing about illusions. Once discovered, they could no longer be seen or felt.

My cock bobbed painfully in the air as I looked left and right.

Where are you?

I tried to remain unbothered, but my mind was brimming with everything I wanted to do with Miss Candy and Rum.

My madness was there. She was close, and that was all I cared about. Years of loneliness, years of waiting to die, years of nothing evaporated in my search for her. She would be mine. From the depths of my soul, I knew something new and hopeful would begin with her.

“Come out,” I said. My eyes scanned the room and closed in on a folding screen. Each panel had black ink drawings of cherry blossom trees and mountains.

I stopped in front of it. “I can smell you everywhere.” I waited for her to step out, but she remained quiet. My hands twitched with impatience. I could wait no longer. “Now!”

She gasped.

My patience snapped. I knocked over the screen, and she stood.

Glaring at me, she asked, “How?”

Grasping her arm, I pulled her against me. Soft met hard. Perfection met corruption. I was naked. She wasn't, but I still appreciated my cock pressing against her stomach. Closing my eyes, I buried my nose against the top of her head and inhaled.

“Who...” The question died on my tongue. I didn’t care about answers anymore. She felt right against me, and that was all that mattered.

She trembled in my arms. “You’re not supposed to....” She trailed off and exhaled deeply when I slid my hand through her hair and tugged her head back. “You shouldn’t be able to see me.”

“You brought me here.” I smiled. “What do you need?” There was a sense of urgency with my desire for her as I squeezed her tight as if I needed us to become one. Something inside of me was restless, like I should be doing more.

Her aroused scent flooded the room. Like her natural fragrance, her sex smelled like candy goodness but richer with her desire. More rum than Jolly Rancher. I lowered my face to her collarbone.

“This is bad,” she panted and wrapped her arms around my neck as I kissed and nuzzled her skin. “You can’t know me.”

“Why?” I dragged my lips over her collarbone, and she shuddered again. She rubbed against my cock, and I groaned. I swallowed heavily as I glanced at her smooth skin. Did she truly exist? Could something so perfect be real?

When I saw her lifting her leg, I caught it effortlessly. She... My thoughts faded as she grinded against me. Her pants were soaked. “Jesus Christ. You’re so wet. I’m going to take care of you.”

She whimpered as her fingers raked through my hair.

Ah, fuck. I nearly fell to my knees when her soft, hot lips covered my earlobe. “Here.” I set her down.

“No,” she whined. The sound sent blood rushing to the tip of my cock. She actually tried climbing back up me like I was a pole.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

I needed to devour her. She'd kill me if she kept dry humping me. Stopping her, I growled. "Your clothes are in the way. Give me a second."

She froze and then quickly backed up, nearly stumbling. "No."

"No?" I echoed.

"This wasn't what I wanted."

The rejection stung. The word not triggered something dark within me—a part I tried to keep deeply buried. My body shimmered, skin and bones fading away in patches, and my black soul revealed. I stared and stared until she squirmed under my searing gaze. I wanted to cut her down with it until all she felt was my longing. Instead, her fear tainted the richness of her arousal and dampened her skin with sweat. Her wide eyes darted over me. My forehead crinkled as the pain settled in my chest. I fought the urge to rub it. Why did she fear my response to her? I wanted nothing more than to take care of her. Now and forever. She must understand that. I would show her.

I prowled closer and the ache in my chest intensified as her fear heightened. I felt it as if it were my own. A battle within me raged. Too much, one part reasoned. Not enough, the other replied. My demon was too dominating right now. She's mine. Mine to take care of. Mine to worship. Mine to devour.

She watched me closely, inching back with each step I took. "Shepherd, what are you doing?"

Hearing my name reminded me I was once human. That I fought to remain humane.

“You know my name.” But it was also that moment, the wariness in her voice that reminded me I wasn’t human at all, and it was time to embrace that. “And yet, you haven’t given me yours.”

Her throat tightened as she swallowed. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

Her gaze fell to my cock, and she swallowed heavily again, red flaming her cheeks. “Fucking Hades.” She staggered, squeezing her legs together. Holding her stomach, she fell to her knees, and her rich arousal filled my senses. My nostrils flared. It was more potent than before. I was no longer intoxicated by her. In that moment, I became spellbound.

Need her.

Want her.

Must have her.

But when her gaze lifted again, her pupils dilated as she looked at my chest. I followed her line of vision to the pink goat. “Oh, Hades.”

I pointed at the tattoo. “Did you do this?”

Her voice rose. “No.”

“But you know what it is,” I stated, dropping down on one knee before her. Her eyes widened as she gazed at my cock. Desire surged in my belly. She was as drawn to me as I was her. The lust I had for her was unlike anything I’d experienced before. Trembling with the need to touch her, I reached out and let my fingers flow through

her pink soul, seeping around her. I murmured, “The goat is even the same color as your soul.”

The flush on her cheeks spread down to her neck as she covered her eyes. “Shit!”

She didn’t seem happy about the goat. And for some reason, that bothered me. “I think I deserve an explanation on why I’m here...wherever here is. And I’d really love to know your name too.” I leaned closer, and her arousal filled my senses. I’d never been around such a creature. I crowded her with my presence, and she reacted to me. It was addicting.

“You weren’t supposed to see me,” she said again. “Why didn’t you touch the blonde I gave you?”

“Because of you. All I see, think, and desire is you. For the last week, you’re all I’ve obsessed about. Why would you create an illusion of another woman for me?”

“You don’t understand.” She trembled. “I need... I—”

“Tell me, and I’ll give you whatever you desire,” I begged, desperate to soothe the heartache I sensed within her. “I don’t know why, but I can’t handle your sadness.”

She stopped shaking and studied me. “Shepherd....”

There was hesitation and need all within those two syllables. My head spun. Was it me, or did her smell keep getting stronger? My body was an inferno, and her blue orbs staring at me became ecstasy itself. She’s mine. Her vibrant soul caught my attention as it floated close. It brushed against my cheek, tingling my skin. I inhaled sharply. Of course it smelled delicious. Every fucking thing about her was delectable.

My skin evaporated and pulled apart. I didn’t ask or want the transition. It just

happened. Her eyes widened as she scrambled away from me. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured, but as I spoke her soul wrapped around my form. My shadow wanted to tease her skin. Without thinking it through, I let my desire guide me. Hands formed in my miasma. She gasped as they inched beneath her shirt. Her skin was like warm silk. I groaned. I needed to explore more of her.

It was there I inevitably made a mistake. The second my shadows moved through hers, I groaned as her candy-flavor rolled through me.

“Did you—” She glared, and I knew what she assumed.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

I froze as my mind processed the situation. I didn't devour her essence, but when our souls slipped through one another I tasted her perfection, anyway. Regardless, by the fury darkening her eyes, this was a great offense. "Ah... Your soul came to me," I stated. "I didn't eat it, okay? Maybenibbled... Your taste just came to me when we—"

A scythe materialized in her hand. Somehow, I got the feeling she wouldn't take too kindly to anything else I had to say. It didn't help that I still ached from the inside out for her.

"Put that away. I don't want to eat you," I told her. Mostly.

Her knitted brows and stern glare were the last things I saw as the room spun black.

Four

Prudence

Jolting from my bed, my knees thumped the wood, and I gasped. Slowly, my breath reached my lungs, but it didn't fill me with calm—something I needed above all else.

My body tingled and ached for the same person I ran from.

The stupid, stupid soul reaper!

His phantom caress lingered all over me. Whatever he did in his reaping form still electrified my skin. I didn't know a soul reaper could touch flesh. I felt his shadowy mass all over me. Although it was just a dream, all of my senses were intact. Before

he could continue, I pulled myself together and shoved us out of the dreamworld. The act left me an aching mess with no relief.

Dematerializing my clothes, I collapsed onto the bed and summoned my vibrator. “Please, please,” I panted, splaying my legs wide and turning on my toy. “Shepherd.” Closing my eyes, I pictured the soul reaper exactly as I left him—tousled sandy-blond hair and piercing green eyes. The way he looked as if he wanted to crawl inside my soul and live there. “Ah!” My body burst to life when the vibrations hit my clit. Yes! My skin heated, and nothing else mattered but him and the mindless ecstasy I sought.

You’re all I see, think, and smell, Shepherd’s words echoed inside my head, and a gush of liquid seeped out of me.

“Same,” I cried out since the soul reaper wasn’t present.

Even so, he was already inside me, controlling and dominating my desire.

I’m going to take care of you, he had said huskily.

“Please,” I whined, then glided the pink toy farther down until it was aligned with my opening. Licking my lips, I thought about his proud erection. Guiding the vibrator inside, my stomach jerked as the first waves of euphoria began. Shepherd was bigger than my toy. He would have filled me up so good.

Then I remembered the pink goat glowing on his chest. Soulmate. I came so hard my vision blurred.

How?

Why?

Shepherd was my other half? The one to complete me? I thought soulmates had connections. All I had to give him was my desire. While that might be fun for some, lust got tiring quickly. Angry tears spilled down my cheeks. It wasn't fair. I didn't choose to be cursed with the unbridled emotion. With an object in my pussy and my fingers drenched in my juices, I realized something. It wasn't that I didn't want a soulmate. In all my years, I'd never connected with anyone because I didn't think learning about someone and falling in love was possible for me. I didn't believe connecting with someone like a mate could happen. I desperately wanted those things despite pretending otherwise. But to find my soulmate this way? To know that he was already ensnared by my erotic scent... That was Lust. Not me.

How could Shepherd know me simply from my perfume—a scent that made him obey my curse? He couldn't, right?

Turning off the toy, I removed it from my body and glanced down at myself. My glistening fingers made me look away. Disgusting.

Why would the soul reaper want to be the mate of someone who couldn't control herself?

Stop.

Despite my harrowing thoughts, I deserved love and affection. Everything I desired, including someone's time and loyalty, especially my soulmate.

I studied the mark on my chest. My curse. It was you, wasn't it? Of course it was. Couldn't my sin let me have that magnificent male—my soulmate—without ruining it? Shepherd was beautiful with sculpted abs, striking green eyes, and perfect hair. Why did the symbol force me to find him in such a disgraceful manner? What my curse needed from Shepherd was an eternity with his body.

My soulmate wouldn't understand me. No one could, not even me.

Another wave of desire clenched my core, and I pushed the toy inside again. I came instantly, thinking of Shepherd. It didn't help. Climaxing while picturing him only made my longing soar. After the third orgasm, my body was a trembling frenzied mess seeking a different release. From a certain male. I screamed and threw the vibrator at the mirror on the wall. Shards of glass, tinkling like bells in the wind, flew across the room as the mirror shattered into a million pieces.

Tugging on my hair, I rocked back and forth in desperate demand of relief.

Shepherd could...

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

I couldn't fight it or run from it, which meant I had to confront him in the dream again. I shouldn't have left when I knew I required him. It was only an illusion I created. It wasn't my actual body he touched. So it was fine. I would never have to break my own rule if I just gave into the fantasy.

For Hade's sake! I could do that.

Despite how much I needed him, I couldn't confront him right away. I'd wait a few days. Maybe the ache would lessen as I slept. If I went to him again so soon in his dreams, he might wonder why, and I couldn't risk him learning how much I needed him.

Five

Shepherd

Eighteen hours.

That's how long it had been since I sampled the mystery woman's soul. Those hours could have easily been days with how differently time moved in the Underworld. I wrestled with the fact I tasted her soul. Why did I shift into my reaping form? It had been an accident. I'd been so blinded by my desire for her that I became uncontrolled. For the rest of the night, I had to fight the urge to go to her.

She consumed my thoughts. The idea of having her in my arms sent a strong, persistent tingling across my skin. Those irrational feelings were like nothing I could explain. Her indigo eyes had been so full of shock when I groaned. Before my

mistake, it seemed as if we agreed on something. Like she wanted to come to me. God knows that's all I wanted.

I waited for her in my dreams. The next morning I tried to sleep longer, but my body refused. I hung around the trailer in hopes she'd send me to her dream realm again. If she came, I wanted to be available for her. Knowing she might come to me eased the desire to seek her. Something told me it was for the best. She might have sought me out in our sleep, but it didn't seem like she wanted what I had to offer. For some unknown reason, I yearned to be whatever she needed.

I rubbed my face. Was it the mark on my chest making me feel that way? Did I care?

For whatever reason, something so beautiful—possibly deadly—had appeared before me. All I wanted was to learn her name, get to know her, and find out why my body longed for her. Plain and simple.

When Dirk returned at noon I was spread out on the couch with my eyes closed, trying to find my way back into her dreamworld.

My mysterious woman... Why hadn't you come yet?

"Sire."

I peered down at Dirk. "Did you learn anything?"

He picked up a single purple petal. "Yeah, I did."

"Let's hear it." Sighing, I sat up and cracked my neck.

Inspecting the dead flower, Dirk asked, "Where's Wallis and Marty?"

“Probably still asleep.” I grabbed a pack of smokes from the table, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it.

“Why are you still lying around?” Dirk crossed his arms and observed me. “You never sleep so late.”

“Waiting on someone to visit me in a dream again,” I admitted even though he wouldn’t understand.

Or so I thought.

“You encountered a woman at the human festival, didn’t you?”

Inhaling deeply on the nicotine stick, I arched a brow and exhaled. “We cross paths with dozens of them every time we’re out. Of course, I saw women there. Hundreds were kidnapped and brought to the Underworld for that sick tradition.”

“You’re dodging the question. I said a woman. Not women.”

“I never spoke to a single woman down there.” Not a lie.

His nostrils flared. “You crossed paths with someone and something profound happened. Or more like began when you saw her, didn’t it?”

How did he know?

When I said nothing, he asked louder, “Didn’t it?”

“Yes!” I snapped. “It’s her, isn’t it? She’s done something to me.”

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

He smirked, showing off his filthy teeth. “Oh, no! She’s done nothing, Sire. Your true nature is finally revealing itself.”

My shoulders stiffened, and my eyes narrowed. “Say that again?”

Dirk couldn’t possibly know the weird, obsessive feelings I had. While I welcomed the thoughts of the woman, it was unsettling that she was all I cared about. Then I recalled her hypnotic blue eyes and her pink lips. I imagined what she might look like if she smiled, and my heart skipped a beat. She could lead me into the depths of Hell, and I’d be her willing servant.

“Your shadow has imprinted itself onto another. It’s what happens when a soul reaper finds his one true match.”

“One true match?” I blinked. Seconds later, I scoffed. “Care to fucking elaborate? Are you telling me my kind have mates?” That was absurd. Right? My pulsed raced as I considered the meaning behind Dirk’s words. One true match? That didn’t sound terrible. When it came to my raven-haired beauty, nothing sounded bad. A light-hearted sensation rolled through my chest. A mate.

I didn’t think my kind was allowed to have a mate. I didn’t even know the woman, but it was a given I’d be the lucky one. No one cared for soul reapers except for gremlins. Not that I blamed them. I’d need to be a better person for her. First, I had to control my shadow around her. Then I’d learn what she liked and disliked. Yes.

Suddenly, I felt my soul might burst out of my skin. Goose bumps erupted over my skin. All the excitement trapped beneath my flesh itched to break free.

“It’s a bond for life, but I wouldn’t exactly call it finding your mate. It’s a lot more wicked than that.” Dirk’s grin stretched across his face.

My cigarette broke in half as I squeezed my fist together. Of course. I should have known it was too good to be true. For a split second, I believed there could be some perfection associated with being a demon. How dark could it get? I thought of tasting her soul, and my heart sank. I wasn’t meant to hurt her, was I? The act would make Dirk happy if it meant being the cruel sire the gremlins wanted.

“What do you mean?” I asked slowly, fearing what he might say.

“Well, as you’ve learned from your encounter with Grim, soul reapers aren’t exactly good demons. Most kill and plunder spirits until they’re caught by the Reapers. It’s why—”

I slammed my fists down on the coffee table. “Get to the shit I don’t know!”

“As I was saying, there’s this thing that happens when a soul reaper crosses paths with a certain soul. It causes yours to wilt flower petals when you’re not around her. The longer you’re away from her, the more often it will happen. The dead flowers convey your desire for her. Not all soul reapers are lucky to find their mates. Your fortune is her misfortune.” He cackled.

I glared. “How so?”

“She has a soul reaper’s undivided attention. You probably already know this, but your kind loves the same way they devour spirits—endlessly and obsessively. Her thoughts, passions, dreams, and even her needs become your goal. Everything you do will be for her. It can be maddening for the soul reaper. Some soul reapers have driven their mates to death before they realized what they were to them. The desire to devour their obsession can be far too addictive.”

My shoulders slumped. His words were like a bucket of cold water, chilling me to the bone. Oh, fuck. I could still taste her soul. Dirk's information made me consider what happened in the dream. Did I try eating her? Not on purpose, right? That was fucking cruel of me. Mystery Woman had every right to push me out of the dream. If she'd been a normal person, I would have killed her, but her immortality protected her.

"Fuck," I said, running my fingers through my hair. "Shit, shit, shit."

What did she think of me?

I deserved to be cut down. I'd rather die than become overcome with the darkness stealing my sanity. I wasn't a monster. I would never eat a bright, good soul like hers.

I hadn't done so in years. The first few times I pursued souls, I made the mistake. Once I discovered what I'd done, I was more careful.

Shaking my head, I looked at Dirk. "How do I make it stop?"

"There's no stopping it. It's a bond—a part of what you are." His brows raised. "You've done something, haven't you?"

I let my head drop. "She's immortal. If she wasn't, I would have devoured her in a dream last night." Only that realm meant she wasn't real, so I didn't actually nibble on her. But I tasted her! And it offended her. I squeezed my eyes shut as my pulse raced.

Despite it all, my mouth watered and my cock hardened. Just thinking of her forbidden scent made my bones itch. I wanted desperately to find her.

"Close your mouth, Sire, before you drool on yourself."

I glared at him, wiping my mouth. “This can’t work. You know that, right?”

“Why not? This is pleasant news. You finally understand that it’s okay to be a soul reaper. You’re a strong demon, Sire, and feared for good reason. You won’t get yourself killed because you’re smarter than the others. You know how to control your appetite and your emotions.”

“It’s because of what I am that she’ll reject me.”

“Don’t start.” He groaned, and his tiny yellow eyes slanted. “You are the most infuriating, depressing demon I’ve ever encountered.” Dirk snarled before taking a deep breath. “But you are my sire. I’ll live until you are no more.”

I fell against the cushions and then laughed. We were quiet for several seconds before I added, “I know where she is. Always.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“Yes. That’s part of the attraction.”

I closed my eyes. “I want to go to her. Always.”

“Yes, Sire. You won’t be able to deny the pull toward her much longer.”

“I think she might have a connection to Grim. Her location is often in his woods.”

“Your life is pathetic but keep going.”

“Is the bond the reason why I have a pink goat on my chest?”

“A what?” Suddenly, the cushion dipped beside me. I opened my eyes and saw Dirk next to me. “There’s nothing about a pink goat in the books. Show me.”

I sighed and lifted my shirt to my throat.

Dirk tilted his head and hummed. “This isn’t a part of your DNA. I’m not sure what this is.”

“Have I been cursed?” I asked.

“If you must wear a pink goat for the rest of your days, then yes,” he said flatly.

I dropped my shirt, and then thought of Mystery Woman with her big, doe-like eyes. I smiled and wondered about her. Who was she? How old? I desperately craved to learn everything about the woman. What did she do outside of her job as a Reaper?

Although I'd never been into the emo chicks as a human, she was a more regal version with pale skin, indigo eyes, and dark clothing. Maybe the woman just liked her black. My dick throbbed, and I tried not to adjust it in front of Dirk.

"Does the mating predicament affect her the same way it does me?"

"No. You're the soul reaper. Not her."

I scowled. "You mean I've got this intense, otherworldly experience going on with someone who feels nothing at all from it? What the hell, Dirk? I thought mating involved two people."

He cackled, and I hated that the smug bastard enjoyed my misery. "Why do you think I said it was unfortunate for her? I wasn't lying when I said some soul reapers go mad over these bonds. It's all-consuming. While there is a connection on your side, it isn't always instant or reciprocated from your partner."

I rubbed my jaw. "So, it's like normal dating with me wooing her?"

Shudders wracked my body once more. An intense throb trailed down to the tip of my cock. The urge to come nearly overpowered me. She was all I needed. I swore I could taste the candy rum scent of her on my tongue. I let my hand drift lower, dragging it over my abdomen.

"How long will you be able to woo her, though? She's rapidly becoming an obsession you won't be able to—" Dirk paused and exhaled as he looked at me. "You're already losing your wits. You won't last another day."

"What?" I murmured.

"You're an inch away from shoving your hand down your pants like Wallis." Dirk

pointed toward my hand resting on my waistband. Fuck! Although I knew what I was doing, I didn't care.

"I was scratching my stomach," I lied and stood. "Wake Wallis and Marty. We're going to Mike's."

"You should go take care of that." He pointed at my swollen crotch. "Before we have another Wallis on the loose."

I hated those damn gremlins. Even more when one was right.

---

Instead of taking Dirk's advice, I drove us to Mike's bar. Two games in nine ball and my pulsing dick was still painfully hard. My grip on the pool stick slackened as I slouched over the table, breathing rapidly. "Fuck." I rasped, rubbing my face. What I felt went beyond desire. I just... I couldn't focus. Everything hurt. I needed relief. I needed her. Every second got a little worse. There was no ignoring my aching cock.

Closing my eyes, I saw my mystery woman. Those enchanting eyes slid over me as she leaned closer. I groaned, skin prickling beneath my shirt as her fingers grazed the fabric. But when my arms shot out to wrap around her, she vanished into black smoke and all I held was emptiness and a twinge of desire for her. Opening my eyes, I gazed up at the moldy ceiling. "Come to me," I whispered. I'm dying.

"Sire," Dirk said somewhere close. "Get off the pool table."

What the hell? How did I end up on my back, anyway? Not caring, I groaned and dragged my hand down my abdomen. My body jerked when I stroked myself through my jeans.

Something was wrong. There was no way I felt so horny over an honest-to-Godsoulmate. Feeling desperate and shaky wasn't normal. It was maddening. Was this how a junkie felt when they were jonesing for a fix? Although I hadn't been close enough to breathe on her in the real world, I yearned for her. A touch...a kiss... Hell, I'd take anything she offered. I feared if I got worse, I wouldn't be able to ask. I'd simply take. There was an urgency inside me begging me to do something instead of ignoring the overwhelming desire. She needs me. Those three words came to me. The knowledge helped somewhat, but it wasn't enough. I had no idea what I could do for my soon-to-be lover, but I sensed only I could satisfy her need. Why did I feel it so deep inside me?

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

I really should go to her and let her decide my fate before I lost control. My sister was an old lady at the end of her life. She didn't need me. Plus, I had no reason to keep living off souls any longer, especially if Dirk's information was correct. I didn't want to become a plague on someone else's life either. For the tiniest second, the idea of someone loving me filled me with hope. But I didn't want to become a nightmare for my nameless, mysterious woman who beckoned me in my dreams. Those two realities collided, and I exhaled.

Fuck. What I needed right then was relief. Unbuttoning my pants, I licked my lips and thought of her rich arousal spilling out in the dream. At any minute, I might walk to my truck, drive home, and press the button on that portal chip. I'd find her, get my hands on her, and... Yes. The idea had me reaching for my—

"You're lucky no one else is in the back of the bar!" Dirk yelled. Looking to the left, I saw him beside me.

"Go away," I shooed him.

"You going to do this here?"

"Fuck yes," I moaned. "Need her, but I need relief first. It hurts."

"Show me the mark again." Dirk asked as I rested against the pool table.

"Touch me, and you're dead." I pulled out my cock and stroked it.

"Something is strange about Sire," Wallis whispered.

“Quiet, Wallis. I’m thinking,” Dirk said.

“I’ve been waiting so long for Sire to get a woman. When will we go get Boss’s lady? I want to see what she’s like,” Marty said excitedly.

“I don’t think this is just the bonding at work,” Dirk finally said. “Would you stop?”

Licking my lips, I jacked harder. Man, that feels good. I thought of my mate’s jet-black hair cascading over my bare chest as she leaned over me... Oh, yeah.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing,” Marty murmured. “Sire has become Wallis.”

“It’s too soon into the bonding process for you to be this bad.” Dirk waved his hands in front of me.

I stopped, eyes widening as I stared at my cock in my hand. What the—I sat up, ignoring the wave of lust washing over me. Whipping my head left and right, I saw that no one paid attention to me. I swallowed, letting my hand drift lower once more. I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to stop even though I should.

“Need her,” I croaked.

“Your soul bonds with hers. That way, you’re aware of her whereabouts and her desires. It even makes you more attuned to her emotions.” Dirk’s jaw dropped. “That’s it! This isn’t you, it’s her. You’re likely experiencing what she is on a smaller scale.”

Smaller scale?

I stroked it while imagining her. And it was still standing painfully erect, begging for relief. Begging for my mate. What was small about my agony? The damned purple

petals were all over the place too. Enough. My jaw tightened as my cock twitched.

I'd find her and make her repeat the act. How could one woman be that fucking horny? I was dying. If she needed me that badly, I'd be there.

"Is she a succubus by any chance?" Marty asked. "It would explain a lot about Boss, anyway."

Wallis covered his mouth and snickered like my pain was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. I'd never looked so foolish in front of them before, and it was getting on my nerves.

"That would make sense." Dirk grinned. "Your bond is letting you know her needs. Seems to me it's making sure you're the only one who'll deliver for her."

I growled. The foreign sound, filled with a dark, swelling emotion, was less than human. A strange, ugly feeling tightened my chest at the idea of someone else satisfying her.

Was she a succubus? I never sensed demon blood within her. I only picked up on the Reaper power and her immortal soul.

No, she couldn't be a demon. But maybe something similar?

Regardless, no one would touch her. I'd make certain of it, killing anyone who dared to try. My anger seeped through my pores, and my nostrils flared as I turned. My body readied for a fight with her. I would let her lash out at me after I'd eased her ache. But first, we would take care of our needs.

"I've got to find her," I declared, carefully tucking my cock back inside my pants. My engorged dick pressed against my leg, and the throbbing seemed to intensify. I gritted

my teeth and hissed. Zipping my jeans, I took a deep breath and mentally cursed myself for not bringing the portal chip with me. Even in my reaping form, it would take a few minutes to get home if I left my truck behind. As I hobbled around the pool table, I reached into my mind and located her.

I froze, forehead crinkling. That couldn't be right.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“She’s here?” I said, looking around.

Abruptly, the entrance to Mike’s swung open, and every head in the bar turned toward the door. Mystery woman’s long dark hair was twisted into a topknot with a few loose strands hanging over her forehead. Her cheeks were flushed with a slight sheen to her skin. She wore black jeans and shirt. From where I stood, her blue eyes looked completely black. My gaze drifted to her shirt. With every breath, the material tightened around her ample tits, and my jeans got more uncomfortable.

“She came to me,” I uttered. “Again.” Delight spiraled in my chest and bloomed into a deep ache. I just wanted to be close to her.

A gust of wind blew through the open door, and with it her tantalizing aroma wafted toward me. I inhaled. Wrong move. It only intensified the pounding in my cock. Suddenly, I understood why she smelled like rum. Just like the liquor, the female intoxicated. But there would be no sipping her slowly. I planned to guzzle her down and enjoy the burn. I was going to get wasted off of her.

Groans filled the room. My gaze bounced from every man and woman in the room. Their mouths parted, and their eyes glossed over, like they were in some sort of lust-filled trance.

“What is that smell?” Marty absently rubbed his hands against his pants. Wallis, though, happily pumped his pencil dick into his palm.

“It’s her, isn’t it?” Dirk’s tiny Adam’s apple bobbed up and down, and he pointed toward the mystery woman. “No wonder you’re going mad. How are you

fightingthat?”

She scanned the crowd, not coming close until she spotted me.

A bald-headed man cut her off. “I can take care of you, sweetheart.”

Before he could lay a hand on her, I grabbed his shoulder and shoved him away.  
“Fuck off.”

Then I spotted the dude in the stool a foot away from her and gritted my teeth. He had  
was jacking off, much like I was earlier, as he stayed focused on her every move.

My muscles tensed and fury filled my veins.

I.

Would.

Kill.

Them.

All.

No one deserved to look at the beautiful creature approaching—but me. Because she  
was mine. My salvation. I tightened my fist as I stalked toward the masturbating man.  
Before I reached him, long, delicate fingers slid up my sides and latched onto my  
shirt. My heart thundered in my ears. The warmth rushing through me obliterated the  
anger. My gaze lowered and something fuzzy and right flourished in my chest despite  
the passion raging through my veins. Finally. The demon within me shuddered, happy  
to see her and delirious to have her right there. My racing heart was close to bursting.

As she pressed her chest against mine, I noticed how hot she was. She was like a flame, scorching my skin through the fabric. She rocked her hips against mine, and my eyes rolled back. Mine. There was nothing I wanted to do more than possess her body and spirit, like she had stolen mine. Caressing her neck, I tilted her head. Bending slightly, I nuzzled the spot behind her ear. She shivered and plastered herself against me. Pressure built at the tip of my cock, and I hissed. I'd never known passion like that. Would it be the death of me?

Who cared? What a way to go. Buried between my mate's thighs, taking care of our needs. Flicking out my tongue, I tasted the perspiration on her skin. She grinded against my dick with her tits smooshed against me—God help me. Without a doubt, she was my woman.

When she raised her leg, I lifted her until both of them wrapped around my waist. My palms gripped her ass, and a shudder wracked my body. She fit so beautifully that my heart sang. Adjusting her position, she dragged her tongue across my neck. Pleasure zinged down my spine, adding fuel to my aching cock. I swayed and nearly knocked over a table.

“Jesus,” I muffled against her hair. Her wet pussy soaked the crotch of her jeans. The man and demon inside me reveled in that. I wanted to drag my tongue all through her juices until she cried out my name. My hands shook as I grabbed her hair and tilted her head back. She whimpered as I sucked along her neck again, hard enough to imprint myself on her skin, so she'd know who she belonged to.

She's so soft.

Something about her made me think of a naughty princess. Even mauling me in a bar, I still remembered the regal way she looked the first time I saw her. Perfect, but cold. Something I shouldn't be touching but would, anyway. Tightening my hold on her ass, I lost myself in the taste of her salty skin. The repetitive slap of flesh against

flesh filled my ears. Dragging my lips from her neck, I looked up and noticed acts of sex throughout the bar. Then it dawned on me. Everyone was fucking because of her. What exactly was she?

The last straw was a man grunting out his release. Snarling, I picked up an empty glass on the table beside us and chucked it at him. Unfortunately, the object bounced off his shoulder and crashed to the floor. The shattering tumbler did nothing to distract the couple.

“Hey,” I hissed at my soulmate—Jesus, I couldn’t wait to know her name. When she didn’t respond, I grasped her chin. “We can’t do this in public. You can come to me anytime, but not like this.” I took a deep breath. “Do you understand that I’ll kill everyone in here, and it won’t faze me?” When she whimpered and dry-humped me, my gaze softened. Her lips parted as she stared at me. “Hey...”

Something wasn’t right. It was as if her body was on automatic. She wasn’t the previous night’s Goth princess who escaped her dream. It was like she was under the influence of some sort of drug.

She shoved a hand between us and wrestled with my belt. I wrapped my fingers around hers and stopped her frantic movement. “Easy, Princess. Let’s get out of here.”

She sighed.

A second later, my fucking pants disappeared. I fought the delightful shiver worming its way under my skin. Without pants or boxers, my cock was rested against her drenched jeans. “Did you do that?” No answer. Again, it seemed she was under a trance, allowing action but no words.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“Come on,” I said.

Instead, she squeezed my dick. Oh, damn. Her touch was electric and everything I needed to ease my suffering. I groaned and eased her off of me. She kept clawing at me, latching on to my body.

“Stop, please,” I begged. “I can’t think of anything more than your delicious body and the bad things I want to do.” I waited for her to say something. Anything to let me know she was there with me. “But you’ve put the entire bar into a frenzy.” The more I tried to reach her, I gained some control over my raging desire. “Are you gonna talk to me, Princess, and tell me your name? You really don’t want me to fuck you in front of so many humans, do you?”

Frustrated with her lack of words, I hiked my mystery woman over my shoulder and carried her out. She bucked, moaned, and scratched my back with those long nails. Good God. Delightful chills spread down my spine. Dick bobbing, I walked out to the parking lot with her writhing and whining. Thankfully, the area was void of people—they were still inside fucking away. Unable to help myself, I groaned and kneaded one of her ass cheeks pushed against my face. I wished she would respond. Fuck.

“What are you, by the way?” I was so desperate to learn about my soulmate I couldn’t stop talking. “I don’t sense any demon blood, or anything foul whatsoever, in you. How are you driving yourself and everyone around you mad with lust?”

When I reached my truck, I opened the door and dropped her inside. Eyes, like molten lava, watched me intently. Her pants disappeared and then she parted her

thighs. My mouth went slack, and my desire intensified, making my legs shake and my cock bob.

Holy fuck.

Her dark curls were drenched, and her clit so swollen I could see it pulsating. Gods, she was so alluring my chest ached. Her juices trailed down her ass, shining over her anus like a beacon. What exactly did she want? I couldn't think straight with her offering herself up. She ran her index finger over herself and that enticing scent of hers flooded my nostrils. My head spun with thoughts of plunging my dick inside her sweet cunt.

Drawing closer to her, I stroked my cock. A crippling need to have her unfurled within me. She was so beautiful. So enticing.

Grabbing her hips, I pulled her to the edge of the seat. Tremors wracked my arms as I aligned myself to her opening. God, I never wanted someone so desperately, like I might die if I didn't take her right then.

She bucked, and the crown of my dick slipped inside her velvety heat. A chaotic bliss consumed every inch of me. This. With her. I was right where I was meant to be. Her body arched as she moaned. When her eyes opened and that blackened stare met mine, my heart sank.

No. The moment was wrong, no matter how right it felt to be with her.

Withdrawing from her, she thrust her hips toward me. I froze and licked my lips as I looked down at her glistening pussy. Stop. Focus, Shepherd. Her whining made me rub my cock between her slick folds. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. Her desires were mine. I sensed her needs, twisting inside me, begging me to act. I'd do anything for her, but not that way.

Fuck! It took every ounce of control I had to listen to my heart. Every part of me screamed, "Take her until she remembered who she belonged to."

The woman was mine. To my soul, she was everything. The reason for my very existence. The reason I wasn't meant to die that day so long ago. When I thought my life was over, Mystery Woman appeared and filled me with nothing but her. My soulmate. She was the light in the Hell I'd been searching for.

Dirk's words rang through my head. "While there is a connection on your side, it isn't always instant or guaranteed from your partner."

I would show her that although I was a soul reaper, I was capable of loving her. That I could control myself and not hurt my nameless princess. I hadn't had a reason to be happy in a long time since not many liked my kind. I feared her rejection, but I also knew it wouldn't stop me from pursuing her. Besides, she was the one that came to me. I'd use that to my advantage.

One thing for certain, I had a deep desire to take care of her. The longer I let her writhe and cry out, my soul pushed and pulled at my insides and tried to burst through my skin. Her hands found my hips, nails digging deep. I hissed and tried to think of what I could do that wouldn't hurt her pride when she came out of the weird trance. The last thing I wanted to do was cause a bigger rift between us. I created enough problems when I accidentally fed on her soul.

She tried nudging her pussy onto my cock again, and I pulled away. "Don't," I said gruffly. Leaning forward, I slid my hand to the back of her head and pulled her closer. "You don't want this." I gestured to my cock. "Not really." The princess I remembered from the dream pulled away even though I could taste her desire in the air. "I could fuck you now before you come to your senses, but in the process, I'd lose you forever." That I couldn't allow. Whatever was happening between us, I wanted it to last forever.

She blinked and gave me a glimpse of her brilliant azure eyes. But just as quickly, those blues were gone, and she tried reaching for my dick again. With an exhale, I shut my eyes, needing to block her out for a moment, to get a grip on myself. This was going to kill me. Despite my resolve and my body shaking with desire for her, acid filled my stomach at the thought of denying her. It was like it hurt my soul to refuse her, even knowing it was for the best.

I didn't look at her again until I closed her legs. Not that that would help when I smelled her candy rum arousal all over me and my truck. "Scoot, Princess." Nudging her slightly, I climbed in beside her and shut the door. Rubbing my face, my skin tingled when I felt her getting nearer. I scooted the seat back and let her climb into my lap. "No, don't," I whispered, but it lacked conviction because I let her grind against me once more before stopping her. Just kill me now. How was I supposed to do the right thing when every inch of me burned to claim her?

Focus.

One thing was clear. She needed relief. Maybe then she'd return to normal. "I want your name after this," I murmured as I glanced down at the damp curls between her legs. A storm brewed inside me. So fucking close. All I had to do was align our bodies and drive home. Perspiration dripped down my chin, and I swallowed. Her long, delicate fingers wrapped around my cock again. "Dear God," I threw my head back and moaned before pulling her hand away.

She was still straddling me, so I said, "Here. Up on your knees. Let me take care of you." My voice came out raspy. Goose bumps broke out over my flesh as she buried her nose against my neck and kissed me softly. When she didn't stop, I pushed her away gently. Her back hit the horn, and it blared. Shit! I needed to take her to the backseat. Pulling her off of steering wheel, I noticed how the noise had no effect on her.

Where are you, Princess? And how do I get you back to normal? Maybe if I played with this beautiful pussy...

A white fog clogged my mind when she bucked against me. Her drenched pussy stroked across the top of my cock. I gripped her hips harshly and hissed. Not this position. The more she tried to have her way with me, the stronger I wanted to resist. I wanted my soulmate to answer me when I took her body. She'd know it was me that claimed her.

With a growl, I slung open the driver's side and carried her to the back door. Opening it, I pushed her down until she was sprawled out across the seat. Climbing above her, I shut the door. As soon as I caressed her clit, she cried out instantly. Taking her hand, I brought it to my aching cock. "If you don't touch me too, I might die," my voice was barely audible as she grasped me tightly. Her stroking had me bucking into her hand. Dragging my fingers down her pussy lips, I delved two fingers into her tight honey and her body bowed. Her climax was instant.

Damn it all to hell!

Her hold on my dick slackened as she rode her release. Her inner walls still spasmed around my digits even as her back dropped to the seat once more. The deep sense of urgency clinging to my soul hadn't lifted, though. My connection with her was powerful. I wondered if I'd always feel her emotions and needs so deeply.

Her hair moved like a dark waterfall. With her head tilted back, she took her desire as I finger-fucked her. Her shirt wiggled up and revealed creamy smooth skin. Honestly, she was too much to look at.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

With an exhale, I buried my face against her shirt, between her tits. I couldn't stop shaking. The tip of my cock felt engorged. Need her... Placing my palm over hers, I urged her to stroke me. She didn't need any more guidance. One tight squeeze and the roll of her wrist, I shattered. Cum jetted out and hit her stomach as waves of pleasure crashed over me. Shudders wracked me as I came down from the orgasm. Satisfaction was swallowed up by my guilt. Something so wrong shouldn't have felt so right. I knew she wasn't normal...

My dick hardened again. My woman needed more. Raising my head, I glanced around the parking lot. Not wanting anyone to see her on my lap, I realized I had to get us out of there. Withdrawing my fingers from her pussy, I said, "We can't stay here."

I wasn't surprised when she didn't respond. But my eyes widened when her fingers slid across my cum on her. I swallowed. What was she doing? I groaned when she sank her digits inside her pussy. Instantly, her body shuddered so much I saw the flex in her abdomen. My mate cried out as she came, then rested a moment, panting. Holy shit. Did she just—How did my sperm cause an orgasm?

Possessiveness clamped around my heart. I traced her face, her hair, and every inch of her beauty with my gaze. How are you so perfect? I wanted to ask her.

We stayed like that for several minutes with me absently running my fingers through her hair while she rested. When her eyes opened, my heart sank because they were still dilated and unfocused. We shared so much intimacy already, and I had yet to learn anything about her. My chest tightened. I was desperate to learn everything about her.

I had to take care of her. She still needed release, although I wasn't sure why. The bond pressed against my bones and guided me. When she returned to normal, I'd finally learn about my mate.

When I spotted the rest of my cum on her stomach, an idea hit me. I glided my index finger across it and pushed it inside her pussy the same way she did the first time. She clenched around my digit as she came, body bucking wildly into my hand. Amazing. My soul trembled as I watched her come back down from the high. How was that possible?

After she came, she curled up on the seat. My heart nearly jumped out of my ribcage at the sight. Rubbing my chest, I fought the urge to take her into my arms. Climbing over the console, I got into the driver's seat and cranked the engine. I drove a few miles until I reached a back road. There was an old, deserted strip mine not too far away. By the time I parked the truck, she was already stirring. As she moved around in the back, my cock jerked to attention. My eyes rolled back as I exhaled. The connection was all-consuming. I grabbed the duffel bag on the floorboard, stepped outside to unlatch the tailgate, and spread out the clothes. It wouldn't be comfortable, but it was better than the rusty truck bed.

When I returned for the lusty princess, she jumped me as I neared the door.

Please, God, if You're listening, give me the strength to keep my dick away from her pussy. I didn't want to fuck up my chance with her.

---

My hands cramped with how long I'd been pleasuring my princess. Night came, and the moon became our only light. The urgency left me as the hours bled together. Satisfying her had been the goal, and I did that. A deep sense of pride hit me as her body sagged onto the clothes beneath us. Her head dropped against my shoulder, and

she slowly closed her unfocused eyes.

My muscles were stiff, but I didn't care. It was worth taking care of her needs. I had to wrestle her away from my cock more than once, but all it took was rubbing her pussy, and she purred like a kitten. I smiled as I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and removed my other hand from between her thighs. She no longer needed relief. I sensed it in my bond with her as she drifted off.

“When will we get to talk, Princess?” I asked before kissing her forehead. A deep sense of belonging gripped my chest as I stared down at her moonlit silhouette—her mouth parted and cheeks still flushed. I'd never seen someone so breathtakingly beautiful. Unable to help myself, I palmed her pussy and tucked her against my chest. Hugging my lusty princess close, I fell asleep.

Six

Prudence

There was sated, and then there was gorged. Lust was so full she slept soundly for a change.

Despite the sun blaring down, I shivered against the cold. When I moved, I felt a wall of solid muscle. Then the heady musk hit me. Breathing it in, I tensed. I'm with a man! Suddenly, I was fully awake and very aware of who was beneath me.

A giant palm rested on my shoulder while my head lay on my soulmate's arm. My bare leg draped over his, and a certain body part pressed against me, let me know we were naked from the waist down. My pussy brushed against his thigh as I tried to slip out of his embrace. My cheeks burned as I realized that I was the reason we were naked.

Disgraceful memories flooded my mind as his breath blew across my hair. A lump formed in my throat and my heart raced as the heat from my face trailed down to my neck. Oh, Hades! I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. Facepalming, I grimaced. Foolishly, I believed I could control Lust and the things she made me do. I thought I could curb her desire before I invaded Shepherd's dreams. I'd been so wrong.

Oh, no!

I let him play with my pussy all night. When Lust took over, it was like sleepwalking, but I was fully aware and unable to stop myself. Making matters worse, I acted without a conscience. It wasn't until after Lust was done with me that I cared.

So shameful!

I had to leave before he woke up. There was no way I could face him. How could he understand what I experienced? Why would he even want to?

Because he has my mark.

My heart skipped a beat as I recalled how I went to Shepherd because he was my marked mate.

He inhaled, and I stiffened. Was Shepherd waking up? My pulse grew louder in my ears before I finally opened my eyes and glanced up. His dry lips were an inch from my forehead. A soft puff of air heated the spot. Waking up beside a man was strange. For a moment, I forgot my embarrassment, letting his breath fan over me.

When I moved my leg, there was soreness from Shepherd stroking my pussy all-night. The memory made my clit tingle. The burst of sensation was foreign, but not undesirable. Oddly enough, I didn't think it was my curse. It rested inside me. The slight hum of pleasure came from what I felt—what I could feel. I closed my eyes,

hoping it would shut off my mind too.

It only lasted a second before I was staring again. I scooted up slightly. That aligned our lips. His breath blew out, which tickled mine. I can't see him very well. Scooting back, I rolled to my side and studied him. His dark blond hair curled at his ears while his long lashes fluttered while he slept. His nose was strong and prominent, and his dark pink lips fuller than mine. The stubble on his jaw enhanced his rugged, yet handsome, appeal.

Shepherd Donovan.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

A dreamy sigh escaped me. My curse wanted him, a soul reaper, as my soulmate for eternity. I had yet to read his past. Honestly, I was afraid to do so, but after witnessing what happened with my siblings, there might not be a way out of the whole marking business.

Fate wasn't fair. Humans didn't know how lucky they were in that department. They were able to choose their lovers, make their own mistakes, and experience everything else when it came to love. Not immortals.

Maybe there could be something beautiful about destiny. If my curse would just let me be...

My eyes widened as two green eyes stared back at me. Then I remembered why I wanted to run—to avoid humiliation. Not that we had sex. Did we? I didn't think so. So why didn't he try?

While I panicked, he casually murmured in a sleep-filled voice, "Hi."

I blinked, and then blurted out, "Hi."

We stared at each other for a long while before he reached out and rubbed his thumb beneath my eye. I held my breath as he gently caressed me. "Your eyes are blue again. I'm glad you're back to normal."

Normal? I didn't know my eyes changed when Lust took control. I'd only fallen prey to my curse once before with the retired Reaper. Averting my gaze, I sat up quickly and dragged my fingers through my tangled hair. What on earth did I look like?

Those knots came courtesy of the soul reaper. Shepherd had pulled out the hair tie, then gripped my black mane in his hands. My body had arched as his fingers stroked me. The memory made my skin tingle, and my clit throbbed.

I stared at his parted lips. Not helping.

“You gonna talk to me, princess, and tell me your name?”

Out of everything he said last night, that had been the one thing he asked the most.

With my fingers snagging in my hair, I whispered, “Prudence.”

“Prudence,” he said slowly, his brow furrowing slightly. Then he smiled, and it brightened his entire face. “That’s your name?”

I nodded. “Prudence Reaper.”

He sat up. “That’s why I sensed you in Grim’s woods. You’re his daughter?”

“Sensed?” I tilted my head. How could a soul reaper sense me?

Shepherd rubbed his jaw. “About that—”

“Prudence!” a familiar voice called out, and I jumped. Looking toward the tailgate, I saw Kitty and Payne.

Payne moved away from the truck and sighed. “Get dressed. We don’t have time for this.”

My stomach tightened. Shepherd and I were still partially naked. I glanced over at his slightly erect cock and licked my lips. What am I doing? Stop ogling him. Shaking my

head, I materialized pants on both of us. Shepherd must not have noticed what I'd done since he was too busy glaring at Payne.

“Who the fuck are you?” Shepherd spat out.

Payne faced him and lifted a brow. “What? You talking to me?”

Oh, no!“What are you guys doing here?” I blurted before Shepherd could respond.

Kitty wagged her brows at me while the men ignored me.

Payne narrowed his gaze on Shepherd. “Wait, a second! You're that soul reaper from the human festival.”

“And you're the Reaper. Glad that's settled. Now, what do you want with Prudence?” Shepherd's gaze turned a shade of purple, revealing his true inhuman nature, as anger thickened his voice.

“Babysitting duty,” Payne shouted. “Not that it's any of your business.”

A muscle twitched in Shepherd's jaw.

“Payne,” I warned as my face and neck heated. Could he shut up?

I stood, but Shepherd snatched my wrist. His violet orbs were focused on my face. “You listen to him, too?”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

My lips flattened before I said. “No. Payne has nothing to do with my leaving.”

Shepherd’s brows knitted together. “We need to talk.”

I pulled away and jumped out of the flatbed. “I agree, but not right now.” Payne and Kitty watched us intently. Plus, I needed space.

“I’ll go with you then,” Shepherd grumbled. I watched him hop to the ground. After our time together, didn’t he realize there was something strange about me? My heart fluttered in my chest and reality hit. He probably wanted to yell at me for attacking him all night, and my heart got all funky and thought the wrong thing about us.

“No,” I said quickly, swiveling away from him. Kitty ogled Shepherd as she bit into a Slim Jim. At least he was completely clothed, but that didn’t keep my sister from staring. I had the weird urge to steal her Slim Jim and stab her in the eye with it. “Kitty.” She turned, and a grin stretched across her face.

I glanced at Shepherd and then pushed back my shoulders. “We’re heading to the castle now.” Before Kitty could question it, I grasped her arm and dragged her away from the truck.

“A soul reaper?” Kitty whispered. “I thought you didn’t do physical—”

“Oh, there’s more,” I told her.

“Prudence.” My feet froze as Shepherd said, “This isn’t over.”

He had no idea.

---

“Sorry. I tried to buy you more time, but once Payne returned from his duties, he wasn’t as easy to fool as the others,” Kitty said as we sat at the kitchen table.

Growing up, the castle had been enormous, but ever since the human festival it seemed too small. My childhood home suddenly became a prison since Dad forced us to live there. I missed the privacy of my home. Having Payne and my little sister witness my walk of shame was unacceptable. The entire situation had been beyond my control.

“You saw me leave the castle yesterday?” I asked.

“No, but I felt it when you left. I figured you were... You know.” She placed her hands together, laid her head against them, and faked snoring. “Making someone have that good dream.” She winked and laughed.

“I don’t know which of us is more embarrassing.” I covered my face. The longer I stayed hidden, the quieter she became.

“Hey,” Kitty said softly. “Was last night really that bad?”

I wiped the tears from my cheeks and met her concerned gaze. How did I answer that? “It was humiliating. I jumped him. And nothing will be the same.” I shrugged. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Her nose crinkled. “You’re right. I don’t understand. Tell me what’s happening.”

“The dreams no longer work.”

“So that’s why you were with the soul reaper? Why isn’t your trick working?”

“Because I encountered my mark.”

“Your soulmate?” Kitty gasped, then her eyes widened. “The soul reaper?”

I took a deep breath. “I think when I encountered Shepherd at the human festival it awakened his mark and therefore prevented my curse from seeking relief from anyone but him.”

“So you two...last night...” Kitty let her words drift off as if she was afraid of upsetting me. “By jumping him, you mean you...”

“We didn’t,” I admitted. “But he did give me what I needed.” After saying the words out loud, I realized how lucky I was. From the way Shepherd looked at me and his body’s response, he felt what I did. My good fortune could have been a nightmare for him. I remembered rubbing my sperm-coated finger inside myself. My heartbeat quickened. Oh, Hades!

Kitty snorted. “I bet it was a real hardship on him.”

“It was all about me.” Quietly, I thought about the rough way I pleased him. Well, not entirely... I did give him a hand job.

“So he didn’t get any relief from taking care of your needs?” Kitty folded her arms as if to say, yeah right.

“I-I didn’t say that.” I sputtered and regretted the entire conversation because it made me relive the dirtiest parts of the previous night.

## Page 25

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Gliding his fingers across the sticky mess he made across my thigh, he pushed them inside me. An explosion of rapture unfurled within me as he leaned in and murmured, “Look at what happens when we come together.” I spasmed around his digits, but he kept pumping them and whispering nonsense in my ear.

The memory sent a wave of pleasure through my pussy.

Clit throbbing, I stood quickly. “I’m done talking about this.” I couldn’t let Lust control me when it came to Shepherd, or I’d never get a chance to know my mate.

“Okay...” Kitty murmured.

“And don’t say a word to anyone about me finding my mark,” I warned her.

“Relax. You can introduce him to the family in your own time.”

She misinterpreted my meaning, but I didn’t bother correcting her. More than anything, I needed to bathe and erase Shepherd’s touch from my skin. Maybe then I could regain some control of my emotions.

Seven

Prudence

With a long drawn-out sigh, I dived onto my bed and smoothed the pillow beneath my head. Sleep was what I needed. Reaper work took its toll on a body. Just a little rest and maybe my mind would be clear enough to face Shepherd too.

Shepherd.

I wondered what he thought about me after I left the way I did. It'd been a few days since I last saw him. Relationships weren't my thing. Hades, I was barely close with my family.

Once again, I wondered how anyone, even a demon like a soul reaper, could find me loveable.

I squeezed my pillow. The night he spent pleasuring me, Shepherd seemed eager to know me. I drifted off to sleep with a smile on my face as memories not belonging to me entered my mind.

"Do you have to go?" Tiffany pouted by the doorway. She looked so out-of-place inside that shithole. The single-wide trailer we called home had seen better days—ones unfamiliar to us.

"I can't miss this interview." I ruffled her hair, and she smacked my hand away with a huff. Sixteen-year-old sisters... "If I get this job, we can move out of this dump."

She peered into the living room. I knew who she was looking at without asking. "What about Dad?"

"What about him?"

"Don't do that. We can't leave him."

"He leaves us every time gets drunk and passes out on the couch." When she frowned, I sighed. "It isn't wrong for us to want out. He's always going to be here for you to check on."

“Who’ll make sure he eats?”

“He’ll eat when he gets hungry. He doesn’t stay drunk all the time.”

Just most of the time.

Our father wasn’t physically abusive or cruel. He just was never there for us on an emotional level. He didn’t care for us the way a loving parent should. I didn’t think we would have survived our younger years if Mom hadn’t been around. Tiffany looked so much like her. My sister was caring like her too. I had every intention of making sure she didn’t waste away looking after our father like Mom did. A heart attack might have taken Mom from this world, but being with a man like our father had drained her years before her death.

“The coal mines are dangerous. Mom would have said you were too handsome to work under a mountain.”

I snorted. “It’ll be fine. I have my mining card.” She huffed again. “Anything else you want to argue about?”

“Will I have to switch schools?”

“No. It’s right outside of town. I can find us a place in between.”

“I don’t like this. I feel nervous.”

“Why are you nervous? I’m the one interviewing.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“You’re not going to leave and never come back?”

“Of course not. If I leave, I’ll take you with me. Why all the questions?”

“Mom left us.”

“Not by choice.” I pulled Tiffany in for a hug. “Sometimes, things happen.”

“Be careful.”

“Always.”

I walked down the steps and lifted the helmet off my bike. The Yamaha needed a lot of work. The body was dented on the right side, and the black paint was chipped. Every check, I made a payment to our uncle for the piece of junk. He wouldn’t let me have it until it was paid in full, which I did a week prior.

Putting the helmet on, I cranked the engine. The familiar vibrations hit my legs, and for a few minutes, while I drove, I’d be free of worries. The bike was a piece of shit, but it was my piece of shit. There was something about working for something—earning it all of your own, that made me proud. A sense of accomplishment was like a burst of energy that crawled into your bones and lived there.

With one final wave to Tiffany, I sped off. I didn’t make it a mile down the road before something tiny shot out in front of me. A fucking black kitten. Our neighbor always said it was bad luck if you crossed paths with one, so I swerved to avoid it.

Luckily, it had enough sense to jump and run back in the direction it came from. I, on the other hand, didn't react so quickly.

Funny how I didn't notice the noise until it was too late. If I had taken the time to listen to the loud blaring, I might have been able to avoid what happened next. My gaze shot forward, and I heard nothing else but a horn.

When did I collide with the truck?

The mangled jumble of metal and wire was scattered below me. Below? I was looking down on the wreckage.

Staring to my right, a black mass slithered toward me. I jerked and turned left. It was there too. I extended my hand but only saw a shadow.

"I swear there was someone on the bike," someone said.

"There isn't a body or any blood," stated someone else. "Sir, are you sure the bike wasn't in the road, and you didn't notice?"

"He came right out in front of me. I know what I saw!"

"Calm down."

As I searched for the people belonging to the voices, I lifted my other hand. Instead, I saw ripples forming, and I screamed.

"W-what's wrong with me?" Did I die? I'd never heard of a person becoming a mass of black after dying. "Somebody, anybody, help me!" I called out.

When no one responded, my stomach twisted. Instead of walking, I slithered forward.

The coal truck that hit me had a tiny dent in the front. What was left of my broken up bike lay in a million pieces several feet behind the vehicle. No way did I survive that. But where was the blood? My body?

Looking around frantically, I saw nothing indicating I was dead. I stopped near the old man, who stood on the side of the road. Running his hands through his hair, he said, “I don’t get it. I saw him. The bike is proof he was there!”

“I’m going to need you to come on down to the station, and we’ll get this figured out.” The old man nodded as the policeman spoke. “How about we get this truck off the road?”

“Can you see me?” I said to no one in particular.

When no one noticed me, I got my answer. The truck driver pulled off his hat, sighed, and walked toward me. He was heading for the driver’s side of the vehicle, but I was in his path. Before I could move, he slipped through me and then fell over.

A flavor ignited my senses. I lifted my hand to where my mouth should have been. Useless. There was nothing there, but I tasted a bitter fruit, possibly a rotten apple. It faded, and I suddenly felt more invigorated.

“Hey!” The officer rushed forward, and I stepped back as he checked the old man’s pulse. “Dead? How?” The officer muttered to himself before he stood and pushed the talk button on his walkie. “Adam Five code eight.” The man walked toward me. “I have a 10-54. Over.”

As soon as the officer walked through me, he fell over too. The same burst of rotten flavor washed over me before dissipating. I stared down at another corpse.

I couldn’t have done that. I didn’t touch anyone. But they were they both dead.

“No. No. I don’t understand,” I said out loud, and then frowned when my voice sounded feminine.

“I do believe you’ve gone too deeply inside my head, Princess.” A deep voice penetrated the turmoil I felt. “What are you doing in my memories?”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Princess? As Shepherd's words penetrated my thoughts, I realized I was in his dreams—relieving his past as if I were him.

I bolted upright and held a hand to my chest. I subconsciously entered Shepherd's mind again. Instead of invading his dream, I intruded on his memories. And once again, he found me there.

I rubbed my face as my heart raced and then smacked my cheeks repeatedly. So embarrassing! I kept coming to him. Forget sleeping! I was far too curious about Shepherd, but I wouldn't enter his memories again to find out more. Time to face the facts, Prudence. I went there because I fell asleep thinking about him. Like I'd been doing since I left him in the bed of his rusty truck.

I chose not to peek at his past with my Reaper powers, but I found myself wanting to know.

Curling my hands around my middle, I recalled what I learned about Shepherd. Goodness. He wasn't even aware of what he was until his body went into safe mode to protect him from a collision. I held my palm over my chest as the ache settled in. That couldn't have been easy. And killing two people by accident... Oh, Shepherd.

I was all too aware of how out of control a person could feel inside their own body. Touching my bottom lip, I gasped. That was the link. I could relate to my soulmate. Through our pain, I had found the first connection.

Eight

Shepherd

Tiffany's breath hitched as she stood and grabbed her lower back. The blonde hair she used to dye black turned gray and lines marred her face, but age could never erase her beauty. I didn't look a day over thirty, but my little sister had become an elderly woman.

"Do you think her hip is bothering her again?" Dirk asked.

Tiffany's granddaughter tugged on her blouse, wanting her attention. Ali pointed to the slide and yelled, "Watch!" before running over to the playground. Soon the rest of the kids wanted Tiffany to watch. My sister never failed to take out her four grandkids at least once a month. Sadly, I had a lot of nieces and nephews who didn't know anything about me.

In my reaping form, there was no way my sister could see me. She thought I'd bailed on her decades ago. After two years of waiting for me to show up, she gave me a proper burial.

Without being able to reveal myself, all I could do was observe her tears. Three years passed with me stuck as a shadow, not knowing what I'd become. It wasn't until I met the Grim Reaper, and he told me about reverting to my former self, that my existence changed.

But it was too late to tell her I lived. I'd learned too much, and too much time had passed. Our mother unknowingly slept with a demon before Dad. I was the result.

"You're running out of chances." Dirk stood with his arms crossed as he looked at Tiffany. "You'll run out of time one day, and you'll be filled with regret."

Wallis picked his nose and asked, "What are you talking about?"

“It’s nothing,” I clipped out. “Let’s go.”

“Wait!” Wallis yelled. “I haven’t had my touch.”

My form rippled as I looked at him. What was he searching for?

“Marty beat you to it,” Dirk said.

A black and white Husky approached Tiffany. She clutched her chest when the dog nudged her leg. Twisting around, she wheezed, and then smiled. “Well, hello there.” She rubbed the dog’s head, not knowing Marty controlled the animal.

Possession was a little trick meant to protect gremlins if a larger creature came after them. It was the same principle as a ghost jumping into a living person to escape a Reaper.

“No fair!” Wallis wailed. “Let me find a dog.” He darted after a black Labrador and jumped inside of him.

“Where are you going, Bentley?” his owner shouted.

While the gremlins created havoc, my thoughts drifted to Prudence Reaper. Finally, I had a name for the beauty. It had been a day since I’d seen her. What was she up to? With the time differences between worlds, it could have been longer. I desperately desired to go to her, especially after she had been in my head the previous night. Quite frankly, that could have been problematic. What if the little she saw kept her from coming back to me? I didn’t want to scare her away with my past when she was my future.

My soul imprinted onto hers. While Dirk said it could be dangerous for my soulmate, I was determined to fight my baser instincts.

But how long must I wait?

“Sire,” Dirk said.

“What?”

“You’re wilting again.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

I glanced down and saw purple petals littering the ground. “It’s because of her.” With every passing hour, it took all of my strength not to seek Prudence. The longer I was away from her, the harder it was to disregard my need to be with her.

“Ignoring it will only make it worse.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to.” The fact Dirk believed I was avoiding my situation made me laugh. If I didn’t keep myself busy, all my thoughts went to the princess. It was impossible to hide my feelings. There was nothing to do but accept. My waiting was metryingto give her space, but all I wanted to do was back her into a corner. I’d reached my limit. She had plenty of time to come to me, but she hadn’t. I was ready to learn about my future. “A day and a half. I think that’s long enough.”

“Long enough for what?” Dirk asked.

“To stay away from her. Prudence agreed we needed to talk. Instead of waiting for her to decide, I say we do it now.”

“I’m going with you in case you need backup!” he announced as if a gremlin could help me.

“Uh...” I hadn’t told Dirk what Prudence was. “You should know that she’s a Reaper.”

He blinked. “Who’s a Reaper?”

“Prudence.” I sighed.

His tiny yellow eyes widened like planets. “You—you!” He shook his head, then muttered a string of unrecognizable words. “Only you, Sire, would bond with a Reaper.”

I laughed, and my form rippled. “And she’s perfect.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m going alone.”

“I’ll be the judge of whether your soul made a good choice for you.” Dirk sniffed.

“Why? You’ve met her already, remember?” I stated.

He inhaled deeply. “And if you hadn’t taken her out of the bar when you did, I would have behaved like Wallis.” To prove his point, he gestured toward the black Labrador, trying to hump a smaller dog.

The dog owners argued before the little dog was swept off its feet. “Some people shouldn’t be allowed to bring their dog to the park!” the owner clipped out.

“Jack is fixed, lady. Fucking chill.” The man bent down and grabbed his dog by the collar. As the woman strode away, the man patted his dog’s head and said, “Dude, what is your problem?”

The dog was getting into so much trouble thanks to the gremlin.

“Wallis!” I yelled. Instantly, the green demon jumped out and came running over.

“Yes?” Wallis, keeping his eyes lowered, tugged at his shirt.

“Can’t you go five minutes without humping something?”

He bowed immediately. “I’m sorry, Sire. I mean, Boss.”

With one last glance, I smiled at Tiffany as she laughed with her grandkids. She has a good life. Maybe it was my turn.

After rounding up the gremlins, I pressed the portal chip. Time to go see my mate.

---

“I’m so happy we’re meeting her!” Wallis squealed and clapped his hands.

I shoved the portal chip in my jeans and grabbed my cigarettes and lighter. “Only because you wouldn’t stop begging.” I tried to convince the gremlins to stay, but it was no use. So after a short trip to the trailer, we arrived wherever my princess was in the Underworld. Where? I had no clue.

“She must meet us since we’re a part of you,” Wallis explained.

I glared. “In what way?”

“You’re our sire.” Marty waved his arms around frantically, as if that explained everything.

I chuckled deeply as I lit the cigarette. “Dirk, would you mind telling them what my beloved is and what her work entails?”

## Page 29

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

Wallis frowned. “What?”

“She’s a Reaper,” Dirk said.

Marty and Wallis stumbled backward, then tried scrambling away. I reached down and grabbed Wallis, and Dirk latched onto Marty’s arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked.

“Sire, how could you be a soulmate of your natural enemy? We’re going to die!” Marty wailed.

Lifting a brow, I took a puff from my cigarette. “Hmm. Just yesterday, you said I should accept my demon DNA and claim her like my soul wants.”

“Sire!” Wallis shouted.

“Pull yourself together.” I thumped the top of his head. He rubbed it and looked at me like I took his stuffed animal. “Let’s head inside the cave. That’s where I sense her.”

“Why is she in a werewolf den?” Dirk asked, shoving Marty ahead of him.

In the distance, someone screamed from inside the pit. Wallis, backing away from the entrance, fell on his ass. Instead of getting up, he sat there shaking like a leaf.

“Hey, you wanted to come,” I said, walking to the opening.

The space stunk of wet fur and body odor. Apparently, some beasts weren't too keen on hygiene. It was dark, but thanks to my demon vision, I could see inside. Water trickled down the walls. Rounding the first corner, a light flickered across the cavern and created shadows on the surfaces. A fireplace? Rough grunts and thumps filled the dewy air. A werewolf growled, and I crept deeper inside.

A hairy figure, snarling and drooling, crouched low briefly and then circled the firepit. When I saw Payne on the other side of the flickering flames, I gritted my teeth. That Reaper ran off with my mate. The werewolf growled and pounced over the fire. Jumping away from the wolf's claws, Payne reached behind him and unsheathed a sword. He swung and blood painted the floor. Seconds later, the creature's head tumbled away. His eyes stared into the abyss.

Payne wiped his blade on his cloak before sheathing it. A deep scowl settled on his face as he looked down his nose at the smattering of bodies on the ground. Glancing behind him, he muttered, "When will these fools realize they're being used?"

Following his gaze, I saw Prudence sitting on a boulder, one leg crossed over the other.

My throat burned with fury as I clenched my fists. Why was my woman with him again?

"How does that surprise you?"

My entire body prickled with desire at her soft voice. I needed to get rid of the other Reaper. I didn't like how he was always around her.

"Thanks for the help," he said in a clipped voice.

"Happy to oblige," she responded.

Before I could make my presence known, a loud fart reverberated in the cave. Wallis turned blue and gasped. The pungent aroma overpowered the werewolf's funk. I looked left and then right before discovering the culprit. Marty stared at the floor with his hands behind his back. Disgusting little troll. I put out my cigarette against the cave wall.

"Oh, my Hades!" Prudence pinched her nose. Payne fanned his face and groaned. The two Reapers looked in our direction.

When Payne's hand went to his sword, I stepped out of the darkness. Slowly, he tilted his head and regarded me with the same stony expression I gave him. "It's you again. What the fuck did you bring with you?"

In a blink, Prudence materialized beside me. My breath got caught in my lungs at her nearness. Instead of looking at me, she glared at Wallis.

I touched my mate's shoulder. She jolted like the contact surprised her. As our eyes met her pupils dilated. That potent aroma of hers spread like wildfire. Prudence gasped. I inhaled. My hand tightened, and I pulled her to me.

"Not again," Dirk croaked.

Prudence breasts pressed against me, and I grinned. Just as quickly, she shoved me away and her scent began to fade. "Shepherd..." she drifted off. "How did you find me?"

Swallowing heavily, I watched as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and narrowed her eyes. It didn't matter that her scent was fading. The feel of her body against mine lingered. Touching her, being with her, felt right. She feels like home. I didn't want to upset her, but I couldn't wait another second longer to be near her.

“Why the fuck are your gremlins humping the walls?” Payne asked.

How did he not know the reason for their actions? I thought Prudence affected everyone when she became horny. How many fell to her magic before me? Clenching my jaw, I looked at Payne.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:45 am*

“Yourgremlins?” Prudence gawked at me.

Ignoring her, I asked Payne, “Why are you always with Prudence?” Her arousal had dissipated completely, but mine transformed into anger. “She was with me the other day, and you took her away.”

“I’m her babysitter, so lose that expression.” Payne’s jaw ticked.

“Babysitter?” That again? Why the hell did she need one?

“It’s a long story,” Prudence interrupted. “Did you come to glare at Payne or talk to me?”

“It’s been a day,” I said.

“Longer for me.” Tilting her head, one brow slowly raised. “Howdidyou find me?”

“That’s not important.” I wasn’t ready to tell her I bonded to her soul and was already obsessed with her. “Why do you have a babysitter?”

“That’s none of your business.” Prudence stiffened slightly as I stared.

None of my business?

I supposed her answer made sense on some level. After all, we’d just met. But something troubled me. I feared her rejection, which kept me from telling her about the bond. But what were her reasons for keeping secrets? It didn’t matter. I was

determined to tear down walls to learn everything about her.

“Are you in danger?” I asked.

“It’s possible,” Payne interjected. “Harvest targeted one of Grim’s daughters.”

The words made my heart jump.

I frowned. “Who’s Harvest?”

Prudence sighed. “Why are you asking so many questions? You haven’t answered mine yet.” Then she looked to Payne. “And why are you answering for me?”

“There’s nowhere you can go in either world that I can’t find you,” I stated.

Her eyes rounded, and her jaw dropped as her cheeks flushed. “What do you—”

“Harvest started the crisis,” said Payne, rubbing his jaw. “Jesus, where the fuck have you been not to know about him?”

“I have nothing to do with the Underworld.”

Prudence’s eyes softened at my admission. She stepped closer and reached for my arm. I held my breath and waited, letting her choose to come to me. At the last minute, she blinked, startled, and retreated. My shoulders drooped. Why did she stop? I hoped for her to say something—anything—to clue me in to her thoughts, but she remained quiet as traces of sympathy echoed through the bond.

“Are you causing problems, Soul Reaper?” Payne crossed his arms over his broad chest.

Why did he keep acting like her boss? My lips twitched as I glowered at Payne. “I haven’t had the pleasure of being around her enough to give her those.” I hated how much Prudence tensed when I stepped closer. “I can keep an eye on her.” Fucking leave, I wanted to say.

“I don’t think so. She snuck off once, and the entire castle was in an uproar because she was with you.”

Prudence’s expression tightened. Finally, she sighed and said, “Payne, it’s fine.”

Not wanting to scare her, I fought the desire to hug her to me. If possible, I would have stolen her irritation away, so I could discover her smile. I’d gladly get rid of the Reaper for her and eat his soul if she asked.

“If any of the Harvesters show up, Shepherd can eat their souls quicker than you or I can kill them,” Prudence said, then raised an eyebrow up at me.

I nodded. “I’m all yours.” My words held a double meaning. Her lips parted, and she averted her gaze. The second I looked at Payne, my tone deepened. “She doesn’t need you here.”

His chest expanded as he scowled.

Prudence rushed between us and placed her hand on my chest. “Relax, both of you.” Looking at Payne, she added, “Shepherd can’t hurt me.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

I would never.

A gentle reminder to Payne that Reapers could cut my kind down in a flash. It would never come to that. Thanks to Prudence, I was determined to be a better demon.

The veins in Payne's neck pulsed along with his flaring nostrils. Two small black smoke rings wafted out from his nose as he exhaled. Unease prickled down my spine. There was something about that Reaper I didn't trust. I tucked Prudence behind me. As the smoke floated up, Payne's face turned ashen. Immediately, he covered his nose. What the fuck was he?

"Are you okay?" Prudence asked him. When she tried to step closer, I gripped her hips. Her dark brows slanted, but I didn't budge. She sighed and said to Payne, "Did that smoke come from you?"

"Just descend the werewolves' souls!" He grasped the bridge of his nose and turned around.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Prudence shouted, but she frowned immediately after.

He said, "Come to the castle later."

"I know," she responded.

"I wasn't talking to you." Looking over his shoulder, our eyes met, and then Payne ported away.

“Something was off about him.” Dirk said the second the Reaper left.

Glancing down, I spotted Dirk alone. That didn’t surprise me. Gremlin were exceptional at disappearing when the need arose. “Where did they go?” I asked him.

“Hiding.” He pointed forward and then crossed his scrawny green arms. I tried to see what Dirk wanted to show me, but all I saw was a bunch of canned food and piled boxes in a corner.

Materializing a scythe, Prudence ignored us and walked a few feet.

“She doesn’t seem to like you.” Dirk said as Prudence retreated, and she paused midstep before continuing. She heard him.

Prudence waved her weapon, and a dark, swirling hole formed. Looking into the abyss made my skin prickle and the hairs on my arm stand on end. Agony. Fury. Pain. Every negative emotion poured out and smacked into me. It must be the passage to Hell. I stood at a distance and observed. I searched the area for the lost souls of the fallen werewolves. Screams filled the cave as they whizzed past me and through the air into individual black orbs. No matter how desperately they tried to avoid the passages, one by one, they were sucked in. I’d never heard the noises demon souls made. Probably because I was too busy eating them.

Prudence dematerialized her scythe and faced me.

“You’ve been busy,” I said.

Flicking her hair off her shoulder, Prudence said, “Payne has been busy. I merely watched. But that can be just as exhausting.”

I smiled. There was something about her blank, mostly calm facade. Prudence wasn’t

going to make my obsession easy.

The carcass, at her foot, moved. She glanced down and kicked it. Wallis squeezed from beneath the corpse and ran toward me.

I scowled. “Fucking nasty, Wallis. How many times do I have to tell you to stop toying with dead bodies?”

“I’m sorry, Sire.” Wallis fell to his knees and hid his face. “I was scared.” He raised his head and pointed toward Prudence. “Reaper,” he said, like she wasn’t watching him.

“I’m never taking you anywhere again,” I said. “Where’s Marty?”

“Here.” Marty waved his hands as he hopped down from the stacked canned food. So that was why Dirk pointed toward them earlier. It must have been Marty’s hiding spot.

Prudence’s nose crinkled as she stared at Dirk. “So the gremlins are truly yours?”

“Your words are cruel. But let it be known I’m not happy about you either,” Dirk said, meeting Prudence’s gaze.

“Dirk—”

Before I could reprimand Dirk, Prudence called forth her weapon once more. “Cruelty is the gremlin way when left on their own.” Morphing her scythe into a sword, she held the blade out toward Dirk. “Maybe I should end the three of them right now. Save us all some trouble.”

“They’re harmless.” I placed my hand against her blade. “Disgusting but harmless.”

“I never understood the situation between soul reapers and gremlins.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

My hand twitched as my desire to touch her grew.

“You’re definitely not a succubus.” Dirk studied her before asking, “So what are you?”

Prudence put her hands on her hips. “Come again?”

He mimicked her stance. “I said, what are you? Recently, you sent an entire bar into a sexual frenzy.”

Her cheeks reddened. “You were there?”

“So was I!” Wallis eagerly raised his hand. “When I smell you, my lady, I want to hump everything.”

“That’s it!” Prudence pointed her blade at Wallis. “You’re dead!”

“You want to hump everything, anyway.” Marty said before glancing at Prudence sheepishly. “I’ve been waiting for days to introduce myself, my lady. I’m Marty.”

Her enchanting indigo eyes met mine. “Why do they keep calling memy lady?”

“I have no idea.” Scratching my chin, I averted my gaze. “Princess sounds better, right?”

Her shoulders stiffened as she glared at me. “Are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

“By calling you princess instead of my lady?” I lifted a brow. “Believe me, there are many things I want to do to you, but fighting isn’t one of them.”

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish. It was cute. As I learned about my mate, I would enjoy every one of her reactions. Finally recovering, she slammed her lips shut.

“Are you going to answer Dirk? What is it about your smell that drives people wild?”

“It’s a curse.” She grimaced, like the words were hard to say. “You’re aware of the seven deadly sins, right? My siblings and I are each cursed with one. Can you guess mine?”

“Lust!” Wallis yelled. “I’m Wallis, by the way.”

“How fascinating,” Dirk mumbled. “So it comes and goes then?”

Prudence studied him. “You’re pretty quick for a gremlin.”

“Can I touch your hair?” Wallis asked.

“Sure,” she said. He beamed. “But I’ll cut your fingers off as payment.”

Wallis froze with his hand in the air.

“Dirk,” I said in a low, commanding tone. It was enough to let him know what I needed him to do.

“Come along, you two. You’ve met Sire’s woman. Let’s give them a minute alone.” Dirk gestured to the other gremlins to follow him.

Prudence watched them leave the cave. “Sire’s woman? Care to explain?”

“I have no clue why they’re saying that.” I dragged my fingers through my hair and then gave her a nervous smile, hoping she didn’t see through my lie.

Her eyes sparkled, and the ghost of a smile crossed her face. Then she coughed and crossed her arms to hide it. “Uh-huh. I’m not buying it. Just like you don’t know why they’re calling me my lady?”

“Not at all. I’d much prefer them to call you princess.”

Her gaze raked over me. “Shepherd.”

“Yes, princess.” I waited.

“Stop it, right now.”

“About your curse,” I started.

“What about it?”

“Who do you normally go to and how often?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“You’ll come to me from now on.”

“W-what?”

After learning about her curse, her reaction surprised me. Her face reddened, and she clutched her weapon tightly like she needed something to hold on to. Why was she so nervous? I wanted to be the one to help her when she needed it. My bond would tear me to pieces if I thought of Payne or another male taking care of Prudence’s needs.

“With your permission, of course,” I blurted, letting her know I’d never take advantage of her sin. “You came to me, so I thought—”

“Yes, I did,” Prudence said, looking down.

My heart sank. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable, but I needed to talk about what happened between us. Did she remember anything?

“I need to know,” I said, “were you aware at all during—”

“I was,” she interrupted.

I sighed.

She continued, “But my curse muzzled me. I couldn’t talk or control my body, but I was there inside my mind. Does that make sense? It’s not easy to explain.”

My forehead wrinkled. “Is it always like that for you?”

“Hades, no!”

Thank God! I really, really wanted to know and touch the real Prudence.

“I normally never let myself get that bad. The curse has changed, so I have to make new rules. Don’t worry, though, I won’t let myself get that far gone again.”

Why would I worry?

She lowered her head again, and I fought the urge to lift her chin.

I wondered about her reasons but couldn’t figure them out. Unless... A storm raged inside me, twisting and growing until my jeans were uncomfortably tight. She said again. Could I take that as confirmation she would come to me? As I watched her fiddle with her cloak, I realized Prudence was nervous, which was surprising given her curse. What was she hiding behind that facade? Someone a lot more bashful than the wild version I encountered at the bar? Someone needier? Grumpier? I yearned to know. I needed to see every facet of her personality.

First, I should probably give up some of my secrets—like the bond. While I readily accepted it, she might not. Prudence was my reason for being alive. Her existence fueled a thirst for life that had died long ago. Someone needed me. I belonged

somewhere.Me.As the knowledge eased the weight on my heart, I wanted nothing more than to wrap her in my arms.

But my princess had already seen some of my memories. If I hadn't stopped her when I did, she would have been disappointed. The idea that she might reject me snagged something within my chest. I wasn't proud of my past choices, but I refused to let her see actions that might drive her away from me.

"Good," I responded.

Prudence kicked the dirt with her boot. "Why?"

She didn't look up. Once more, my mate came across as quite bashful. My body stirred and itched to hold and shield her from everything wicked, except me. "Because I want you and your reactions to my touch. Why else? Wouldn't you rather be the one in control instead of your sin?"

Lifting her head, Prudence exclaimed, "Yes. That's all I've ever wanted."

A rush of energy slipped over me. I grabbed my chest, thinking that my heart might beat right out of my ribcage, but the rhythm was steady. The excitement faded slowly, and then it hit me. Thanks to the bond, I experienced Prudence's enthusiasm. I sensed it through our connection. "Then that's what I want too."

She frowned. "Why?"

How hard was it to grasp that I wanted to please her?

## Page 34

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Can’t I want the same things you do?” I asked.

Prudence tucked her hair behind her ear. “Don’t,” she warned.

“Don’t what?”

“I don’t know. Your presence is confusing me. You’re not what I expected in a soul reaper.”

“I hope I’m better than you imagined.”

With a reluctant smile, she nodded. “Yes. You’re tolerable.”

“Tolerable?” I wagged my brows. “Surely, I’m more than that.”

“You lose a lot of points because of your vermin.”

I laughed. “They grow on you.”

“You’re delusional, too. Let’s subtract some more points.”

I placed my hands in my front pockets. “You came to me a day ago. I took care of you, remember? Plus, there’s the little matter of you entering my memories the other night.”

Her smile waned. “I remember.”

“You keep coming to me.”

“I know.”

“Let me be the one to take care of you all the time.”

She worried her lower lip for a moment and then said, “Shepherd.”

“I can’t go on without you, Princess.”

“You don’t even know me,” she began.

“But I want to.” Her nose crinkled as her cheeks reddened. “I’m serious.” My eyes raked over cloak. Her hands trembled underneath my intense stare, and she clasped them together. “I can’t live without seeing or touching you. I probably won’t be able to stop myself unless you kill me, Princess. Not that I want you to kill me.”

“I don’t understand...”

As dread weighed down my shoulders, I knew it was time to tell her the truth. Exhaling, I raked a hand through my hair. “It appears my soul has found a mate in yours. For soul reapers, an unhealthy compulsion forms.”

“Unhealthy? How can soulmates be a bad thing?”

“We obsess over them. My feelings for you keep intensifying.”

“How?”

Rubbing my neck, I continued, “The bond lets me know where you are at all times. It’s taking a great deal of restraint not to stalk you. If this keeps up, I don’t know if

I'll be able to keep my distance."

"And you hate it?" Prudence asked softly.

"No, but I'm afraid of what I might do if I stay away from you." If Prudence rejected me, who knew what kind of monster I'd become.

"There's something you're not saying." Prudence crossed her arms.

Some soul reapers devoured their soulmate. I refused to let those primal instincts win. I could do better, and I would for Prudence.

"There's this too," I said, lifting my shirt. "Do you know what it is?"

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Oh, that.” Prudence hesitated and then said, “It’s the mark of Lust.”

“I’m cursed, too?”

She shrugged her shoulders and wouldn’t look me in the eyes. “That’s one way to look at it.”

My mate left things unsaid, and so did I. I would leave it for the moment.

“Listen, I have work to do...”

“We’ll accompany you. You’re not supposed to be alone, right?” I arched a brow.

Her shoulders sagged. “Payne will find me soon enough.”

My mood darkened. “Who is he to you?”

“Friend of the family. A big brother, you could say.”

“So he’s never helped you with your curse?”

Prudence laughed. “He’d never succumb to my lust.” Now that she said it, I thought about how unbothered he had seemed when her scent clouded the cave earlier. “He already belongs to someone else although he won’t admit it.”

My forehead wrinkled before I finally processed her words. He was unavailable and like a brother to her. Not a competitor for her affections. Still, I didn’t like him being

around her so much. How could I change that?

"I don't like him," I said.

Her brows knitted together. "The soul reaper gets all caveman just like that. Is it that easy for you to accept what's going on between us?"

"There's nothing easy about obsessing over you. If I had no self-control, I would have gone directly to you after you entered my memories. It's incredibly difficult to take my mind off of you, especially when you've come to me more than once."

"I'm sorry about that." Prudence curled her arms around her middle. When I said nothing, she tapped her temple and waited. "I didn't mean to go there. I wasn't even—"

"I'm not upset, but don't dig anymore. There's not anything redeeming there. I have the same love for my kind as Reapers do."

Prudence scoffed. "Please. I've seen much scarier monsters down here than you. Can't get much uglier than your gremlins, though."

I chuckled. "Say that to them. Break their hearts. They'll only worship you more."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means welcome to my world. Can I be a part of yours?"

Nine

Prudence

The soul reaper continued to surprise me.

When I thought of his kind, I recalled how many we'd destroyed over the years. They were ruthless and uncaring about humans or any soul other than their own people. Plus, they were hard to talk to because of their superiority complex. I killed one a few decades ago and still remembered how he thought I was beneath him. The guy had been devouring souls every second of the day before he hit our radar, yet he considered me dirt. His words, not mine.

So Shepherd threw me for a loop. Without an ounce of shame, he told me what was happening to him. Or maybe it was a warning in case he lost control. Shepherd was a mystery that flustered the hell out of me. At first, I thought my growing interest might have something to do with the demon giving me orgasm after orgasm as he stroked my pussy all night. After seeing him again, I didn't think that was the case, especially after I peeked into his past. I felt guilty for seeing something he clearly didn't want me to know. At the same time, I wanted to wrap him in my arms and comfort him. My impassive mask was partially off. I had no way to put it back on around him.

"You're very straightforward," I said, averting my gaze. Did he have to look at me constantly? I wanted a chance to ogle him.

"You'll prefer me this way. If I try to deny what I'm feeling, it might become a bad thing for you." He shrugged nonchalantly but kept his fierce gaze on me. Despite how casually he spoke, I had a sense he wasn't bullshitting me.

"I'm not worried about you stalking or hurting me." I'd never searched into a soul reaper's lifestyle, so I had no clue what troubled Shepherd. My goat on his chest marked him as my soulmate, and his soul bonded to mine. Our fate decided we needed to be connected in two different ways. My heart skipped a beat, and it was like butterflies took off in my stomach. Connected. Tied together. Understood. It sounded beautiful, and out of the realm of possibilities with my curse.

And he hadn't look revolted in the least bit when I behaved wantonly.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Good.” Shepherd’s voice pulled me from my reverie. “I’d make a terrible stalker since stalkers aren’t supposed to talk.”

I chuckled. “You’re the strangest soul reaper I’ve ever met.”

His gaze flickered over me keenly. “And you’re absolutely stunning.”

I stopped laughing as my cheeks warmed. To hide my surprise, I averted my gaze. There it was again. It felt natural to feel around him and show all the things I kept locked in. The soul reaper gave me an opportunity to tell the truth about the goat mark. But telling him that the curse intertwined our lives, including sharing my immortality with him, should be done during a special moment. Plus, I didn’t want to tell Shepherd he might share my fate if we didn’t stop Harvest, or the Devil, from crossing over.

Fear snatched my heart and squeezed tight. I placed a hand on my chest.

Shepherd, with a crinkle in his brow, touched my arm. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I lowered my hand. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Through the bond, I sense your emotions. Right now, you’re afraid.”

“You can feel what I feel?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes.” His thumb lightly rubbed my skin until goose bumps appeared.

It was an innocent gesture, but it ignited a firestorm of desire within me. My pulse quickened and lust obliterated my thinking. All I wanted was him.

He inhaled sharply, and his eyes blackened before brightening into a vibrant purple. “I sense that too.”

My clit throbbed at his passionate gaze. “Sense what?”

“Princess,” he said gruffly. “I can help with that.”

Panic clawed at my throat and lust ebbed. “While that’s true, I have terms for when that happens again.”

His brows furrowed, and his pupils return to their normal shade of green. “Terms?”

“Yes. Will that be a problem?”

“No. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

---

When I needed to aid a few ascending souls, Shepherd followed me into the human world. He stood outside the houses or hospital doors with the gremlins, making the green creatures more tolerable. But once we were in the Underworld again, I reached my limit while I tracked and killed a fox demon.

“Stop right there.” My nails dug into my palm as I tightened my fists and walked over to the gremlin humping a corpse.

As my blade hovered near his skinny throat, the fiend shook and quickly zipped up his jeans. In a trembly voice, he lied, “I was making sure he was dead!”

“With your dick?” I grabbed the back of my neck. “Some creatures won’t learn. Better to kill them.” My sword followed him as he stepped away.

“No! I’m sorry, my lady!”

“Stop calling me that. It makes me feel old.”

“I wouldn’t doubt if you weren’t over a century or two.”

My gaze whipped toward the grumpiest of the gremlins. “You’re right. I’m still in my hundreds.”

“Dirk.” Shepherd posture turned rigid. The stuck-up gremlin looked away from him and uttered a humph. “And Wallis, stop humping shit before I let Prudence kill you.”

“Disgusting creatures,” I muttered. “Why are they with us again?”

“Because we are Sire’s faithful servants,” Dirk said, placing a hand over his heart. He truly adored his master.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Some servants.” I scoffed. “You don’t listen or behave properly.”

“But we’re loyal,” Dirk said. “Wallis knows not to harm a living creature. Sire would kill him if he did.”

“I’m shameful and don’t learn easily, my lady. Kill me if you must.” Wallis was on his knees with his head lowered. Dirk slapped his palm over his face.

“Stop calling me my lady!” I shouted. Every muscle in my body tensed.

Great. Even Shepherd’s pets made me lose my cool, and I still had a few more stops before I could relax a bit. No way could I put up with the gremlins for the rest of the day. But Dad would send Payne or someone to babysit me if I sent Shepherd and his pests away.

I glanced at Shepherd, running his fingers through his blond hair. My fingers let go of my cloak as my stomach fluttered. Despite my irritation with the vermin, I still wanted to be around Shepherd. Almost as soon as the thought came to mind, he whirled around and our eyes locked. Heat blossomed in my chest. It started faintly, but grew as my gaze lingered to his lips. Never been kissed. Never been anything before Shepherd. My curiosity became lust, making my clit throb, and my pussy clench with a desperate need to be filled. Not good. It wouldn’t take much to bring out my curse.

Shepherd’s nostrils flared as he obviously picked up on my emotions. Oh, Hades. I squirmed, squeezing my legs as if that would stop the dampness. Nothing, however, would ease my burning cheeks. I’m not normal. I can’t stare at him without getting turned on.

“Do you have to pee?” Dirk asked, green forehead crinkling.

“Dirk,” said Shepherd through his teeth. “Leave if you can’t shut the fuck up.”

Mortified by the outpouring of lust, I covered my face when Shepherd looked at me again. I was no different from a bitch in heat. Once the gremlins walked away, I blurted, “I’m sorry. I know you can smell it.”

“It’s not strong enough for the gremlins to notice, so don’t worry,” he said, slowly approaching me.

Dropping my hands, I said, “I’m not trying to seduce you.”

“I never said you were.” Shepherd stepped closer. I held my breath as he grasped a lock of my hair and twisted it around his index finger.

“It happens randomly.”

“I’m attracted to you, too. At the human festival, you literally stole my breath with your beauty. Don’t apologize to me, but stop explaining yourself. You’re very bashful for someone who kills demons daily.”

“You’re the only person who would say that.” I admitted.

He scratched his brow and then smiled. “Ah, well, you did give a very calm and cool aura when I first saw you, Princess.”

Is that why he called me that?

I pressed the hilt of my blade against his chest. “So you’re saying I’m no longer cool?”

He grinned. “You’re a badass with this,” he pushed my weapon away. “But you also blush almost every time you look at me.”

I scoffed. “I do not.”

I did.

“I like it.”

My heart raced. I couldn’t remember the last time my chest felt so light.

When I said nothing, he asked, “Where do you need to go next, Princess?”

Ten

Prudence

Shepherd took me by surprise again, but it wasn’t really about him. It was more about my reaction as I watched him in his reaping form. As a shadowy mass, he swept through a smoldering warehouse and gobbled down the souls of an entire group of ogres. Yes, I was impressed that I didn’t have to lift a finger. More importantly, I was stunned at how he could do so much with so little effort.

Throughout the sweltering building were giant kettles. The blazing fires burning beneath them turned the warehouse into a smoldering hell. According to rumors, they were most likely filled with human body parts. Flesh stew, something ogres once peddled, was a popular commodity on the black market, but I thought the trade had stopped when we got rid of human trafficking.

We’d only been inside the structure a few minutes, but my clothes clung to me with sweat. Shepherd caught my eye as I wiped my neck. His violet gaze was bright within

his shadows. Thank Hades! Otherwise, he would have appeared like a whirling black cloud. The way he undulated fascinated me. I found it bizarre to be so ensnared by something nonhuman. But I was more than curious about the man trapped in the darkness.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

As he came close, I asked, “What does it feel like?”

“What does what feel like?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“Your form.” I pointed at his silhouette. “Do you sense your limbs?”

He chuckled before a hand formed and separated from his mass. His ghostly fingers tugged at my black strands. My scalp tingled, and the sensation spread through my body even though he’d barely done anything. “I can make whatever I want within this form, but it feels slightly different since it’s my soul. Prudence...” His words drifted off as his hand grazed my cloak. Slowly, his silhouette expanded. “For so long, I’ve hated what I was. I never dreamed there’d be someone I could feel like this with.”

I sucked in a breath. “Well, you did eat some of my soul.”

“And you tasted divine, but I promise to behave and cherish what I’ve been given.”

I watched my pink essence move toward him. Slightly worried for my soul’s sake, I took a step back. “Do you have the urge to eat more of it?”

“Devour you? Yes. Your soul? No, but I do want to explore it in this form,” he admitted. “Maybe that’s what I wanted to do in the dream but got a little consumed by you.”

All at once, his mass drew together, taking the shape of the male I was used to. Shadows became skin and bones. Even his clothes appeared. “How do you keep your clothes?”

“I’d assume it’s similar to the way you materialize your scythe,” he said.

“Werewolves don’t keep their clothes after a shift,” I stated.

His mouth stretched wide as he came closer. “Because their clothes tear during their change. Hardly the same thing.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“Why do I get the sense you’re a little disappointed I’m not naked?”

Liquid fire shot through my bloodstream. While I hadn’t been thinking of him naked before, suddenly I envisioned cutting off his dark gray T-shirt. My gaze traveled over his chest. Why couldn’t I have stripped off his shirt when mindless with lust? My wicked mind tried to imagine the muscles beneath. Sparse hair or completely bare? Just how strong was he? I licked my lips.

“Prudence.” My eyes lifted to Shepherd’s.

My pulse quickened. “Well, I wasn’t disappointed until you mentioned it.”

Shepherd’s cheeks flushed. Green and purple flickered within his gaze, fighting to see which color would remain. He pulled me into his tight embrace. “You make it hard to control myself.”

He smelled of smoke and spice. I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around his neck as his head dipped to my collarbone. I didn’t know what brought on the hug. Being with him like that was like walking through the front door of home. Welcoming.

Saliva pooled in my mouth and my skin tingled. Digging my nail into his shoulders, I

tried to ignore the sensation, but then his muscles rippled beneath my palms. Oh, Hades. Without thinking, I slid my hand down and slipped it inside his shirt. Chest hair rubbed my palm as I stroked his hard flesh.

“You good, princess?” He gripped my hips tightly.

I froze.

“Relax. I’m just making sure you’re still here with me.”

“I’m still me,” I whispered into his neck.

Shepherd sucked in a deep breath. “Good... But I only have so much restraint when it comes to you and your smell.”

I was glad he couldn’t see my face when I asked, “Will you take care of me?”

I’m afraid, I wanted to say.

I didn’t want to risk blacking out on Shepherd again, and my arousal kept returning too often to ignore. Besides, I wanted to feel him without being trapped within my curse.

“Such a silly thing to ask, Princess. I’m yours to use how you wish.”

My pussy clenched.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Are you finished for the day?”

“No.”

“Then we’ll work quickly.”

God, he made everything so easy. If I had been an ice queen, I would have melted on the spot.

---

Shepherd was so refreshing. He ate demon souls for me everywhere we went. While it might not be romantic, it was oddly pleasing for a Reaper who killed on a daily. He didn’t make me feel ashamed for ogling him every time he shifted into human form again either. Since my arousal was evident, the entire time we worked, we didn’t talk very much, but the silence was nice. I could get used to it.

The nerves didn’t hit until I brought him to my place. Well, I faded, and he followed. I walked over to my bar and plopped down on the stool.

“Your home is beautiful,” Shepherd commented as he sat beside me. “Figures you would have a black chandelier. Is black your favorite color?”

My heartbeat roared in my ears. I couldn’t look at him, knowing the reason I invited him to my home. “Thanks. And yes, I do. I’ve missed my house and privacy since Dad decided that my sisters and I were safer at the castle.”

“Is this Harvest guy that dangerous?” Shepherd asked.

“Harvest is the reason for all the disasters happening in the human world.”

“So the unusual weather and plagues have been because of him? The witch Melinda mentioned something about the Reapers trying to prevent the end of the world.”

Nervousness forgotten, I gaped at him. “Did you say Melinda?”

He frowned. “You know her?”

“Yeah. She’s the coven leader for my brother’s soulmate. How do you know her?”

“She’s the reason I was at the human festival.”

My brows furrowed. It wasn’t the first time Melinda intervened with my family. It was like she was orchestrating the matchups with my siblings. Could she... My eyes widened. “I think she wanted us to meet.”

“Did she know I would bond with you?” Shepherd asked.

I bit my lip. No, she knew you were my marked mate. “Most likely...”

It didn’t make sense to unite us with our soulmates in the middle of a crisis. But given that Shepherd bared my mark, there was no other reason Melinda would have convinced him to go into the Underworld that night. Unless there was something else I needed to know about my soulmate.

“Prudence,” Shepherd murmured before grasping my stool and pivoting it so I faced him. I swallowed hard as he pulled me closer. “Yes?”

“Your arousal is gone. We don’t have to do this right now.”

Oh, Hades. I forgot he could sense my emotions—and my anxiety.

“It won’t take much to get me aroused again,” I promised. “I want you.”

He rubbed circles over my knee with his thumb and just like that, a shiver of pleasure rolled through me. The way his gaze hardened made my heart go pitter-patter. “You’re different from how I first imagined.”

My heart sank, and I lowered my gaze. He’s disappointed. I perfected my aloofness over the decades to restrain my emotions. Until Shepherd, I never realized how nervous I was. Did he dislike that about me?

Lifting my chin, he looked at me sternly. “Prudence. Stop. As a beautiful immortal who can wield a scythe like nobody’s business, you can be terribly hard on yourself. I meant you’re different in a sweet, albeit vulnerable way that makes me protective of you. I don’t want to leave you in a few hours—or ever. For the first time in decades, I remember I’m alive. That’s all because of you, Princess.”

My heart skipped a beat as I met his tender gaze.

“I promise to be a good demon for you.”

Delicious tingles fluttered along my stomach. My body swayed slightly, and I gripped my stool. His words made me feel weightless. Shepherd spoke as if we were already a couple.

## Page 40

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Shepherd.” He stood as I said his name, and his crotch was almost directly in my face. My eyes rounded on his huge bulge in his jeans. I sucked in a breath and looked down.

“Don’t.” Shepherd said as my forehead bumped his penis.

“Oops,” I blurted as my ears and face burned with embarrassment.

Oh, Hades! I hid my face quickly. I’m terrible at sexy stuff.

“Come here,” he said as he lifted me up until I was standing. I touched his chest, unsure where to put my hands.

Actually, I knew just what to do, starting with techniques that would make the man cry out my name. Problem was, I’d never done any of them on someone who wasn’t in a dream.

I felt new and uncertain, so different from the brazen female overwhelmed by Lust. I really wanted to touch him—to be touched. Damn it! Why did my hands shake so bad?

Trying to get my trembling under control, I didn’t hear Shepherd.

“Prudence. Look at me.”

Glancing up, I was met by two green gems boring down on me.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes!”

“Then is this your first time?” His mouth fell open, and then he caressed my shoulders. “How? You’re so beautiful and your curse—”

“I was in your dreams for a reason, Shepherd,” I admitted, waiting for him to piece together the truth.

“You feed your curse through people’s dreams.”

“I didn’t want to share my body with anyone. It might sound silly, but it’s something important to me. I want a connection with someone before I have sex, so that it feels right.”

His stare shifted to purple. Then Shepherd began trembling. Why? “You shouldn’t have said that.” He stepped away, covering his eyes.

My stomach churned. “You’re disappointed I’m so different from my curse.”

Lowering his arm, he looked up. “What? No.” He came back to me and caressed my cheek. “You have no idea what I’m thinking. It’s taking all my control not to flip you over my shoulder and carry you to your room.”

His words went straight to my core and ignited my body. “What are you waiting for?”

Shepherd snaked his arm around my waist, and my heart fluttered like a wild bird.

“Put your legs around me,” he ordered. I jumped and wrapped my long legs around him. He held me effortlessly and bounded up the stairs. Pressing my lips against his collarbone, I inhaled a woody smoke as he carried me. God, I loved his scent.

“Jesus, how long are these stairs?” Shepherd murmured as he ran. His palm gripped one of my ass cheeks, and I whimpered as my arousal flowed from me. “I can’t wait to taste you. Your scent...Fuck! I’m going to devour you.”

Oh, God. Good thing he held me because my knees were weak. I loved it when the men in dreams talked dirty.

I squeezed my arms tighter around his neck. “Keep talking.”

“Hmm.”

Tingles spread all over me as Shepherd whispered in my ear.

“What do you want me to say, Princess?” I sniffed him again, and his grip strengthened. “Be honest. You like it when I call you my princess.”

God, yes. “I’m not a princess.”

He nipped my ear, and my clit throbbed. “Where’s your bedroom?”

## Page 41

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

I shoved my hand down the back of his shirt. “What?”

He chuckled and found it on his own. Without turning on the light, he carried me into my room and lowered me to the bed. My body sank into the plush gray pillows. I clutched the sheets in my hands as Shepherd wedged his knee between my leg and leaned down. My breath quickened.

Despite my nerves, my clit pounded like a heartbeat, and desire pooled between my thighs as his gaze trailed over me. I’m really doing this with my mate. We might be doing things backward, but after a day spent with Shepherd, I grew confident we would do well together.

He closed his eyes and exhaled gruffly. “You have no idea how strong the bond is. It’s frightening how much I want you.”

A deep sense of yearning stretched around my heart, catching me off guard. It wasn’t the bond making him feel that way. I believed it was the link we shared through the marks because I felt it too.

Shepherd opened his eyes and frowned. “You don’t have to be nervous. I’d never let myself hurt you.”

He sat up, pulling me with him. As he rose to his feet, part of me became sad. Was that it? Did my nervousness make Shepherd change his mind? I was stuck in my head, lamenting what would never be when I felt his hand. His fingers inched their way up my pants leg, only stopping when he reached my upper thigh. The soul reaper stroked me lightly as if to ease me into his plans.

Glancing at his shirt, I bit my bottom lip and dematerialized our clothes, leaving his boxers and my lingerie on. I wanted Shepherd to uncover the rest of me like a present. I opened my legs, so that he was eye level with where I needed him the most. Shepherd inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring, and I knew he accepted my offering.

“Oh,” I whispered as I gazed at his massive chest. Slabs of muscles defined him, and light blondish-brown hair dusted his pecs, leading down into a happy trail.

Goose bumps pebbled my skin as his eyes, becoming a beautiful shade of violet, raked over me. I forgot about the pink goat mark above my right breast until his fingers traced it. Fear chilled my spine. I held my breath, knowing my vulnerability wasn't something I could hide from Shepherd and the bond. What are you going to ask, Shepherd? Would you finally demand to know why we shared Lust's mark?

To be fair, Shepherd deserved to know he was my soulmate. But I reveled in the fact he was on his knees before me without a clue he was my other half. His eyes shined brightly, wanting to please me. Every touch was soft yet firm. And his words made me think I could trust him with all of me.

I wanted to bask in his attention before he realized we were destined to be together. Plus, I was still afraid to admit how much I needed Shepherd because of my curse. My sin controlled me enough. It was terrifying to admit to someone the power they had over me, especially if that someone could already sense my emotions.

Leaning forward, I ran my fingers over the pink goat on his chest. I hoped that would be enough for him. Shepherd didn't call out my fear. Instead, he took my small offering. Lifting my hand from his chest, he brought it to his lips and kissed my knuckles.

My worries melted away. His fingers slipped under the edges of my panties and paused. My clit pulsed. “Need some orgasms, Princess?”

I thrust my hips upward. “Please,” I begged. If Shepherd knew and accepted me for who I was, it was time I did too.

He pulled off my undies slowly, and I squirmed under his scrutiny. He ran his finger over my slick folds, and I bucked under the sensation.

Wow!The feeling was almost too much!

“You give the word ‘drenched’ a whole new meaning.” He pushed my thighs up, forcing me to lie back, and a throaty rumble erupted from his throat.

I covered my face as desire and embarrassment warred within me. He’d touched and seen this part of me already, but he’d never put his face down there. It was always his hands that took care of me. But,God, I wanted his lips on my pussy.

Hot air blew over my thighs. My inner walls throbbed, knowing after so many years of denial, I was about to have another first. His tongue swiped over my opening, sliding up to my clit, and sucking it between his lips. My body surged off the bed. The foreign sensation was so sinful and glorious.

“Tastes just like candy and rum.” His pure male groan and the fact he enjoyed me fueled my pleasure.

My stomach became an inferno as he licked me. It swirled and built, from the tip of my toes to my scalp, until the nirvana began to peak between my thighs. I wanted to share all my firsts with him. My empty body throbbed, wanting to be filled.

My spine arched as I cried out. Holy Hades. His tongue, the suction and licks against my clit, made my stomach flutter. With a languid lick that started at the top, Shepherd stopped at my opening and thrust his tongue inside. My body clenched as my libido skyrocketed.Holy—I couldn’t stop grinding myself into his face, and that seemed to

increase his desire.

But then he stopped abruptly.

“No,” I whined, and fisted his hair to drag his face back to my needy flesh. Pushing my hand away, Shepherd abandoned my pussy long enough to jerk down my black bra. The cool air pebbled my pinks buds, and then his hot mouth descended and bit at one slightly.

“Ah!” I cried as the sensation sparked a stronger throbbing in my clit. Black dots spotted my vision, and I fisted his hair again. Was that what I’d been missing all my life? How did I fight my curse for so long when everything Shepherd did felt sodivine? With heavy lids, I watched him fondle my breasts. Dragging his fingers down the slopes and pulling lightly at my nipples, so that delicious sensation never left my pussy. He did nothing more than touch me, but his cheeks were flushed as he focused on my body. Beneath his administrations, I felt magnificent.

With a groan, Shepherd buried his face between my legs again. When he flattened his tongue against my clit, he added a steady pressure that made my knees wobbly. “Right there, yes, yes!” I moaned, thrusting myself against his mouth, and slipped into ecstasy.

My body burst to life. My clit throbbed. Above me, my pink essence moved erratically. Shepherd didn’t care, though. He continued his onslaught on my swollen flesh until I was screaming his name and coming again. That empty ache grew worse. I needed to be filled.

Grasping my hair, I whimpered. I can’t handle what he’s doing to me. Without a moment to come down from my high, Shepherd kept me there.

Oh, God. My stomach spasmed after the third climax, and I scrambled to get away

from him. At my attempt to escape, Shepherd gripped my hips and held me in place.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Shepherd,” I cried. “I can’t...” I felt so out of control. “Please, I need you inside of me.”

Where one orgasm ended, another one began. As Shepherd dominated me with his mouth, I no longer recognized my body. Jittering and weak, my arms dropped to my sides when the giggles began. Hades! The tickling sensation intensified when he kissed up my thigh and stomach slowly. The mattress dipped, and my lashes fluttered. My soulmate climbed above me, looking like a sex god, all smoldering and intense.

Lowering his head, he dragged his lips up my ribs before covering a nipple. My sated pussy throbbed anew, and I arched until he stopped.

“I need to kiss you,” he said before his mouth descended. Soft yet unrelenting. With the taste of me and smoke on his breath, Shepherd took another one of my firsts. I let his desire consume me. His tongue invaded my mouth, searching and dominating mine. He moaned, and the sound stroked my skin with ecstasy. Then he gently sucked on my bottom lip and I whimpered.

Why was the soul reaper the only one exploring? I needed to discover him as well. No, I wanted to. Sliding my palms down his chest, I traced every ridge of muscle covering his abdomen. His flesh pebbled beneath my touch and I smiled against his kisses. Feeling bolder, I dragged my hand down and gripped him through his boxers.

He groaned, and my pussy clenched at the deep, manly sound.

My fingers barely wrapped around his thick girth. And it was all mine! Just like the soul reaper. Yes! I stroked him once more, and his body trembled above me. I felt

heady and powerful as I made the giant crumble. He plunged into my hand as his tongue invaded my mouth.

The urgency to have him grew. I wanted to feel and taste him. How hot did he feel without the boxers in the way? How velvety? Hades! As my desire became uncontrollable, I sucked on his tongue. His big body shook again as he worked himself in and out of my hand.

Our lips broke apart. “Shepherd. Now! I’m ready.” My fist tightened around his impressive length as my heart raced. This is it. Trepidation stole some of my lust, and I froze slightly. I’m ready. So why did a part of me wish I hadn’t said anything?

He stopped thrusting and kissed my forehead. “I want to. You have no idea how much, but you’ve waited a long time with your body. It’s only fair that I respect it too.”

My eyes misted as a lump formed in my throat. Without asking, I knew Shepherd had sensed my unease through the bond. He was my soulmate, and it felt good—amazing. But he’d wait. Knowing I’d give into him tonight despite my hesitation, I never expected that outcome. I adored and cherished what he’d given me. Respect. “Thank you,” was all I could muster at first until I placed my hand at his chest. “Maybe I want to get to know you a little more... But when it’s time, it will be with you.”

He lowered his mouth to my ear. “I know.”

My heart skipped a beat. His voice was resilient. I loved his certainty.

“But I still want to see you,” I whispered. “I want to touch you. Taste you.”

“Fuck, Princess, I thought you’d never ask.”

I yelped as Shepherd scooped me off the bed. My lips curved upward as he manhandled me. Scooting himself to the edge of the bed, he lowered me to the floor before him. On my knees, I squeezed my thighs together and looked up at Shepherd sitting there. God, I wanted to touch him all over, but I gawked at him instead. I had a deep desire to please him and didn't want to screw up.

At my stillness, Shepherd caught my wrist and brought my hand to his chest. "Explore me as you wish."

I ran my pale hand across his tan pectoral muscles, loving the way his sparse hair tickled my palm. I traced every inch of his exposed flesh. From his shoulders, down his arms, back up to his abs where I stopped at his chest again. My mouth parted. His heart beat like a caged bird beneath my touch. I caused that? Tears clouded my vision as my affection grew. If it was purely physical, he wouldn't have been so patient. He wouldn't look at me like I was the only thing in the world.

Shepherd unclasped my bra and it dropped to the floor, snagging my attention. I pushed his hand away before he could caress a breast. "I said I want to touch you."

His purple eyes revealed themselves again. "They were spilling out of the cups."

"Because someone pushed my bra down earlier," I pointed out, and his eyes brightened.

"Come here." He gestured to me. "I need your touch, Princess."

Leaning forward, I let my gaze drop to his tented boxers. My mouth parted when I dematerialized the material. I shivered. My mate was marvelous. His fat mushroom-tipped head bobbed under my stare, and I swallowed heavily.

Biting my lower lip, I took his cock in my hand. He was hot to the touch, smooth, yet

hard as steel. My clit ached for attention. I ignored how much that hollow ache begged to be filled and squeezed him tightly. He hissed, watching me with hooded eyes as he placed his hand at the nape of my neck. Shepherd was aware I lacked experience, but I wanted to please him as he did me.

“What do you like?”

Cupping my cheek, he rubbed his thumb across my chin then shuddered. “Whatever you want to do to me, I’m going to love. You’ve already got me ready to explode.”

Really? A fluttering sensation blossomed in my chest. I hadn’t even done anything, but I believed him. I smiled, tightening my hold on him until he sighed wonderfully.

He lifted my chin and uttered, “Are you real?”

“Yes.”

Shepherd’s head swayed, eyes softening like he couldn’t believe my existence. “If I’m dreaming, Prudence, don’t ever wake me up.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

Something about those words made my heart catapult into the unknown with that man. Sliding my hand up his hairy thigh, I scooted further between his thighs. Dribble ran down my mouth. My hand trembled against his hard length and a steady hum rested between my legs. I hadn't realized how much I wanted to please him until his strong musk filled my nostrils. I need to taste him.

With one languid stroke of my hand, my mouth lowered, and I did just that. His salty taste filled my senses as I curled my tongue around the bottom of his tip. Shepherd inhaled sharply, and I took him deeper into my mouth. His cock pulsed against my lips as he groaned. I sucked until his head bumped the back of my throat. My eyes watered, and I gagged a bit. He's so big.

Wanting to see his reaction, I lifted my eyes. His gaze was partly closed and lips parted like he was in awe. Sliding his hand into my hair, he helped guide my motion, and I let him. "That's it. Relax your jaw," he encouraged. I craved his control and encouragement. "This is making you want to come again, isn't it?" he said huskily.

I murmured, "Yes," against his erection and his fingers shook as his hold tightened. Surprisingly, I didn't gag as I sucked him off. "Fuck," Shepherd moaned and pulled out of my mouth completely. When he started pumping his cock, jaw slack, muscles taut as he watched me, he pushed my hair back and released his cum on my breasts.

It was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

"You could have come in my mouth," I murmured as I glanced down at the semen on my chest.

“Then I wouldn’t have been able to do this.” Hooking his hands beneath my armpits, he lifted me up until I was standing, then stood too. Sliding a hand down my leg, he urged me to spread my legs apart. Looking up, his burning purple eyes still had that unnatural appearance. “Do you want me to?”

Hades, yes!

I nodded, then swallowed as he swiped his fingers through his cum. Knowing what he was about to do made my limbs shake and my clit throb. “Shepherd, please,” I begged.

Without pause, he shoved two fingers inside me. The vortex of lust swept me under instantly. My knees buckled, and I leaned against Shepherd and let ecstasy consume me.

“I knew it,” he murmured in my ear, a very noticeable delight in his voice. “Somehow, my semen makes you come.”

Well, you are my soulmate.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I panted. He whispered seductively, “You want the rest, don’t you?”

My toes curled, but I didn’t feel embarrassed with Shepherd. His trembling body told me he loved it too.

Eleven

Shepherd

“Prudence,” I said, trying to keep her from drifting asleep on top of me. I stroked her

cheek gently, and her eyes fluttered. “Do you need me to dress you?”

“Hmm?” she mumbled.

I couldn't resist the temptation to kiss her. Her lips parted for me, and I swiped my tongue inside before pulling back. She sighed happily and burrowed herself in my arms. My chest cracked and warmth flooded in. Mine. The beautiful, sweet creature was mine. I doubted many, if anyone got to witness a demure Prudence often, so I reveled in the way she stretched out in my arms, her taunt nipples on display.

I was responsible for that. I made her so relaxed she wished to sleep in my arms. Letting my gaze wander, I couldn't resist the sweet allure of the dark patch of hair between her legs. I palmed her there, and the lovely creature let me, not understanding how dark my possessiveness ran. So much so that the dark emotions settled inside me, churning my gut.

I wanted to do right by Prudence, but seeing and tasting her made my longing increase tenfold. While I'd made progress with Prudence's body, I hadn't won over her heart yet. The demon in me wanted to kill any rival, but that wouldn't go over favorably with the other Reapers if I did something so drastic. My ugly thoughts led me to Payne's glare and the way he bossed Prudence around. I didn't care how brotherly she claimed he was. My skin prickled as I gritted my teeth. I had to get rid of him, but how could I do it without pissing off Prudence's family?

More than anything, I wanted to relieve my jealousy, so I didn't ruin my chances with Prudence. What if I lost control and ate Payne for being around her? Just the idea of her saddened gaze had me cradling her closer. I vowed never to hurt her, physically or mentally. I could control my obsession with her and truly love her right.

That being said, Payne had to go. At least from Prudence's side.

“We’re going to your father’s,” I said abruptly.

Her eyes snapped open, and her nose crinkled in a way that I found adorable. “Why?”

“To speak with him. I can’t handle another day of Payne.” Not when I could look after her.

“I agree, but what can you do?” Her indigo orbs brightened. I was lost in them, to her, and the bond.

“I can be your babysitter.”

Prudence huffed, and I realized how foolish I sounded. When she attempted to get up, I snatched her hips. “Why do men think we’re so weak?” She glared before disappearing.

My brows furrowed as I sat up and searched the room for her. Suddenly, a sharp pain erupted in my shoulder as something took hold of my right arm and wrenched it back. Turning my head, I discovered my mate. She smiled and cranked harder, forcing me to tap out with my free hand.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

My princess laughed as she let go. “You make it too easy.”

“Are you sure you have me?” I tilted my head and grinned. Her cackles died as I morphed into my reaping form. She staggered backward as I moved toward her.

“Shepherd,” she warned. I sensed a slight shift in the bond. Part of her was reluctant. Maybe because I was a shadow. She tried to mask her hesitancy with a glower, but I still felt her curiosity. Saw it in her flexed fingers. A sensation, like a restless phantom fluttering against my shadows, came across our link.

Come on. Reach out, I begged.

Prudence’s pert nipples stood at attention as her chest rose and fell. She didn’t move. Just waited for me to do so. I didn’t disappoint. A hand reached out of my blackness. She inhaled sharply as I palmed a breast. Eyes glazed, lips still red from my kisses, Prudence swallowed as I fondled her. Fuck... I could look at my mate for an eternity, and it wouldn’t be enough.

“Shepherd...” Her fingers slipped through me when she tried to touch me. “How can you stroke me, and I can’t even make contact with you?”

“I can do whatever I want to you, in whatever way I want,” I admitted.

Prudence took a step back, watching me intently. I closed the distance again. “Stop,” she whispered. It lacked conviction. We both knew a Reaper could pull out their weapon and wield it against me. My princess might not be able to touch me as I her, but her power could cut me down.

Her pink essence stirred and spread until it flowed around my hand. Prudence's mouth parted as she watched. Just as I sensed her awe speeding up her heart rate, I was humbled by her spirit coming to me too.

"I think your soul likes me too," I uttered as a jolt of happiness rolled over me at the realization.

I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

"Can you feel my essence?" she asked me.

"I can sense you and your emotions. I can also taste you. You're like a sweet, addictive candy."

"Don't you dare eat my soul!"

"I'm not. I simply wish to explore you this way. Will you let me?"

"It's weird..."

"How?"

"Because you're just a shadow right now. How exactly do you want to touch me?"

All over. Every which way. My mass actually brightened briefly, like a flash, before going dark again.

Prudence's candy-rum arousal spread like wildfire, but she huffed and pointed at me.

"See. That bizarre blink in your form suggested something dirty."

"Princess..."

“Let me put it this way. You’re a soul right now. If you touch me or put any part of your shadow inside me...”

My mass trembled, and I inhaled sharply. “You gave me some perspective. I do want to soul fuck you.”

“Get out of your reaping form!” Prudence shouted. “Before I make you.”

Her arousal increased tenfold, but I didn’t tell her that. Instead, I retreated from the shadows and solidified. “Don’t think I won’t try again.”

Funny how much I wanted my mate to accept my reaping form when it took me decades just to tolerate it. If I were being honest, before Prudence there was no reason to like what I was.

She rolled her eyes. “Annoying soul reaper.”

“You’re already wondering when I’ll try again.”

She sputtered a few expletives before sighing. “Come on, Soul Reaper. I thought we were going to my dad’s castle?” A wave of pleasure crashed into me from the bond, and I basked in her happiness.

“We are.”

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

Prudence chuckled. “I’m curious how you’ll convince the Grim Reaper to let you look after me.”

---

“Ah, Shepherd. I’ve been expecting you,” Grim said as he strode down the massive circular stairs into the ginormous ballroom.

Why did he need a ballroom?

Father and daughter liked fancy surroundings. Prudence had a giant-ass black chandelier in her home, while her father had an even bigger white one. Grim seemed to prefer gray and stone walls and floors, with a single piano in the corner of the ballroom, making the area seem bright, but my mate loved black. It was darker, cozier, and perfect for her. I adored her sense of style. Every beautiful thing I discovered about her only made me hate the way I’d lived since my accident. What would my princess think if she saw where I laid my head down at night?

“Payne told me Prudence was with you,” Grim said in a questioning tone.

Sensing Prudence upstairs, I relaxed. She was safe.

“Do you think your castle is big enough?” I asked.

“It feels small with all of my children here.” He stopped at the bottom of the steps. “I’m surprised to see you after all these years. Payne said you had quite the feast at the festival.”

Payne.

Prudence wasn't kidding about him being a friend of the family. Jealousy cut through me like a knife and made my chest hurt.

I shrugged, trying to release the tension. "Does he tell you everything?"

"More than my kids." Grim folded his arms over his chest. "What are you doing with my daughter?"

Gritting my teeth, I said, "I could watch after Prudence instead of Payne."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Not many demons can harm me."

"Our enemy is no mere demon."

"Payne's a Reaper, right? I'm sure they can get more done when they're not together."

Grim smiled. "Prudence and Payne are like siblings. Your jealousy is showing, Shepherd."

I knew that.

It didn't change the dark streak running through me. I wanted to be the only one Prudence confided in. While I wasn't immortal like her, I would spare my existence to keep someone from kidnapping or harming her.

"In the end, you're protecting your daughter. I can do that. I'd die to keep her safe."

My voice deepened. “Let me look after her.”

“I know how good you are at looking after others.”

I stiffened. Grim would know how much I looked after those I loved. That was one of the things that led him to me all those years ago.

“I was going to visit you soon, anyway,” Grim continued. “You helped us a great deal by devouring all those souls at the human festival. I was going to ask you here to protect one of my daughters.”

“You were?” I slammed my mouth shut to keep from gaping at the man.

“Yes.”

“I want to protect Prudence from whatever Harvest has planned more than anything,” I said, then paused. “As immortals, what would this demon do to them? And why?”

“Just because my daughters are immortal, doesn’t mean they aren’t vulnerable. There are plenty of ways to break someone’s spirit. I don’t force watchdogs on them because I think they’re weak. They are vulnerable because they’ve grown comfortable with their powers. My daughters fail to see how easily someone can kidnap or trap them. Harvest has a very strong witch in his group—a proxy. Without even lifting a finger, that woman can take anyone I love and hide them. We can’t track Harvest. He’s concealed so well that if he manages to get his hands on one of my children...” Grim dropped his head and sighed. “I’ve been responsible for the balance of both worlds since the beginning of time. Now that obligation falls on my children. I can’t protect them from the end, but I can at least make sure nothing happens before they get the chance to stop it.”

“I’ll protect her with my life,” I promised.

## Page 46

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Prudence sleeps at the castle for now, but as long as she’s with you, she can do her Reaper work,” Grim said, running his fingers through his hair. Stepping closer, he placed his hand on my shoulder. “What I’m about to tell you is for your safety. You should know that my children have soulmates. Three have already found theirs.”

My heart tightened. She was my soulmate. I saw her pink goat. We shared the same symbol. How could she be destined for another? I refused to acknowledge the possibility. Then again, maybe Prudence did something for it to be on my chest, but I didn’t ask. I’d wait for her to tell me.

But if she grew tired of me, what would I do? I couldn’t give her a reason to let me go. After knowing her sweetness, I’d die without her. Glancing down, I saw the purple flower petals falling at my feet. Fuck. My heart ached at the mere idea of someone else being her lover.

“And Shepherd,” Grim said, pulling my attention away from the mess I made on his floor. “Stop waiting before it’s too late.” I frowned until he added, “you’re running out of time to say goodbye. Your sister deserves to know whose made sure she’s lived a great life.”

He retreated from the ballroom, leaving me alone to digest his words.

Twelve

Prudence

I rummaged around in Shepherd’s memories again...

“Miss, we’ve searched for your brother,” said the Chief of Police as he tightly pressed his lips together. His words were clipped and irritated after repeating himself over and over. After months of trying to comfort my sister, he was tired of the situation.

“Bullshit! You searched the first week. You guys haven’t looked for Shepherd since then. It’s been six months. Something’s wrong. He wouldn’t just disappear.”

The man sighed. “I don’t have the time, money, or resources to send my men out on a wild goose chase. It’s time to face the facts. Your brother was eighteen. He wasn’t a six-year-old that got lost in the woods. I want to help you find him, but he probably just left town.”

“He wouldn’t leave me!” she screamed.

“Of course.” The police chief nodded. “We’ll call you if we hear anything.”

She stormed out of the building.

Outside, she wiped her eyes and yelled, “I hate you! I hate you!”

My stomach knotted as I followed. Not close enough to touch her accidentally, but close enough to make sure she’d be all right.

“You better be alive. You better,” she muttered.

I didn’t know what I was. It definitely wasn’t alive. Hunger was a better description. I was voracious until I slipped through someone. When they died, my appetite ebbed. I didn’t understand what was happening to me, and I couldn’t stop either.

I’m sorry, Tiff.

Even if I could show myself to you, I wouldn't. You wouldn't like what I'd become.

---

A few months later, I found Tiffany working at a diner wiping down the counter. She still lived with Dad, aiding him with his self-destruction. But a leech named Lance had entered her life. I had been gone for a while, wandering the earth aimlessly. When I returned, she was covered in bruises, thanks to him. Eventually, I became the harbinger of his death.

"Come here," her junky boyfriend slurred.

My sister cringed every time the jerk yelled her name. Her hands curled around her middle as she apologized to her workers. That only pissed him off. He ran over and pinned her to the bar. "Do I embarrass you?"

Slipping through him, a burst of flavor—like coffee—filled my senses. Lance toppled over and died on the spot. Tiffany cried. She might be sad, but his death was for the better.

Two weeks later, Tiffany attempted drugs. I followed the man home that sold them to her. As he entered the door, I swept through him, followed by everyone else in the house. Vials of pills, bags of weed, lines of coke, and dollar bills littered a coffee table. Five bodies lay on the floor. I didn't regret my actions. In the long run, Tiffany would be better off. I just had to make sure she survived her choices and eliminate those that messed with her.

Heavy footfalls rushed toward me.

"Oh, my God!" A woman exclaimed and then gasped.

Before I could whirl around, she breached my form and died.

I rippled, and bitter apple assaulted my senses. The flavor was harsh, unlike the pleasant flavor of Tiffany's ex. Sadness dimmed my shadows, and I tried to ignore the change. Then I figured the woman was a dealer like the people on the floor. Bruises covered her face and arms. Pain manifested inside me as I realized I was wrong.

## Page 47

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

That woman looked like she didn't have anyone watching out for her and needed someone—anyone—to care. She could have easily been my sister.

And I killed her.

I peeled my eyes open slowly. It took a second to decipher the doom that weighed heavily on me. The energy shackled me, preventing me from sitting up. But the helplessness, anger, and confusion didn't belong to me. I sighed. Shepherd.

After scanning through two years' worth of his memories, I rose and wiped my face. At that point in his life, Shepherd still had no clue what he was. My heart ached. He was killing people, justifying it for his sister while his self-hatred grew because he couldn't stop.

Oh, Shepherd.

“Good. You're finally awake,” said a nasal voice. I recognized that annoying tone. Leaning down, I spotted Dirk. The gremlin stood beside my bed with his puny green arms crossed. Rustling on the other side of the bed grabbed my attention. I turned and found Wallis tap dancing in my panty drawer. Although I was in my old childhood room and none of my underwear had been worn in decades, I didn't like the putrid gremlin burying his face in a pair while dancing.

Clenching my teeth, I reached over and shoved him. “Disgusting!” Wallis fell over the side of the drawer and hit the floor. The fool jumped to his feet and bowed. “Stop that,” I muttered as I climbed out of bed.

“I deserve to die,” he whimpered, and I rolled my eyes.

“That’s why I told you not to mess with the princess’s stuff.” Marty wobbled toward him.

Oh, brother.

“What are you guys doing here?” I shouted.

“Shh.”

Dirk dared to shush me?

“Can’t you see Sire is sleeping?”

Shepherd was here too?

Dirk pointed toward my huge black beanbag chair I loved when I was a kid. Shepherd was sprawled on top of it. His head hung off slightly, while his legs and arms rested on the floor.

My mind wandered back to Shepherd’s memories. Not knowing what he was created his loneliness. His loyalty to his sister had been gratifying but heartbreaking. He kept saving her while destroying himself.

Suddenly, I had the urge to crawl into his lap and hug him, but that was impossible because his fucking gremlins were there. Why were they in my room while Shepherd looked like a delectable fallen angel on my beanbag chair? Spread out, sleeping so peacefully... A woman could walk right up and plop down on his thighs. My lips curled upward.No!Not going to happen, so stop thinking about it. Shepherd brought the vermin. That wasn’t cool. I wanted him all to myself.

“Oh, your sire is sleeping?” Forcing myself to stop admiring Shepherd, I glared at Dirk. “What about me? I’m his princess.” I blushed. Thankfully, the soul reaper was still snoozing and didn’t hear me. “Because Wallis sniffing my panties won’t work, we’re setting boundaries. Right here and now!”

“After Sire wakes up.” Dirk plopped down on the floor and turned his back.

The vein in my forehead throbbed. That gremlin! With a deep breath, I reeled my anger in.

“I agree. He should be awake.” I smiled wickedly before walking over and grabbing a stuffed gorilla off my makeup stand. I chucked it at Shepherd. A large hand shot up and snatched it midair. My grin faded as Shepherd’s lids opened.

I closed my mouth, suddenly struck speechless. Shepherd’s jaw ticked and something crackled between us as our gazes met. His stare had me rooted in place.

Oh, Hades.

“You peeked where you shouldn’t have again,” he said in a gruffy voice.

My cheek warmed as my stomach churned. Oh, no. He knew I was in his memories again.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked again.

“Babysitting you, of course,” Marty replied, and I crinkled my nose.

“Your room is bigger than our home,” Wallis murmured.

Shepherd cleared his throat and stood. “Let’s hear your rules.” His lips curled upward

and stole my breath. “Myprincess.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

My ears burned as blood rushed through them. He heard me? I should have known the man wasn't slumbering. "You weren't asleep?"

"Hard to nap when someone keeps running through my memories."

I clasped my hands together, unable to deny it, but watched adamantly as he stretched.

When I didn't speak, he added, "I thought you were setting limits with the gremlins?"

"Ah, yes, the rules." I was grateful Shepherd didn't say anything more in front of the vermin. "I need boundaries, especially with you, Wallis." I jabbed my finger at him. "You're forbidden from humping anything in front of me. Also, no sniffing anything of mine. That includes me."

Immediately, Wallis lowered his gaze to the ground. Geez. It was like disciplining a pet. I kind of felt bad, but then remembered how disgusting he was.

Marty, just as guilty as the other two, rushed under my bed.

"You. Warn someone before you release a stink bomb! Better yet, run far, far away when you feel the urge. And you..." I pointed at Dirk. "Lose the attitude. Yoursireis here by choice, so stop being so grumpy around me."

"He's here because his soul has shitty taste in women," Dirk said patiently, making me grind my teeth. "You're only irresistible because of your stench. You're like a bitch in heat all the—"

“Dirk!” Shepherd cut him off. “If you’re disrespecting her, you’re disrespecting me.”

“How could you say that about our lady?” Marty shouted as he climbed from beneath my bed.

“I don’t care what any of them think of me,” I said, glowering at Dirk. “I’m more than a stench, Gremlin. I’m a fucking Reaper, and you’re just a fiend. You’ll never understand anything about my life, so don’t act like you know me.”

With that, I materialized some clothes, replacing my pj’s and faded to my first destination for the day.

---

Lifting my sword, I blew air through my cheeks. “Stop eating them all! I’m not getting the chance to kill anything,” I grumbled as Shepherd swooped through the rat demon I’d targeted. While I enjoyed the soul reaper’s help the day before, I desperately wanted to release some tension with my blade, but he kept intervening. Where were the vampires when I needed them? The soulless fiends would be all mine.

“You’re still upset about what Dirk said earlier.” That was not what I wanted to hear.

Shifting from his reaping form as he approached, Shepherd pushed his blond hair off his forehead.

“A thirteen-inch-tall demon with a penchant for abusing the dead can hardly irritate me,” I muttered as I dematerialized my blade.

“And yet, Dirk did.” Shepherd reached out and caressed my cheek in his large palm.

“What part angered you?”

“Nothing,” I lied. “Why do you keep them? I can barely tolerate them.” Thankfully, Shepherd took them back to his place before we left the castle.

He smirked, taking my hand in his. “Are you complaining, Princess?”

“I don’t get it. I’ve seen enough of your memories to know you’re nothing like them.”

When Shepherd’s smile waned and released my hand, I realized I shouldn’t have mentioned his memories.

“I asked you not to do that,” he said.

“What you went through... Another of your kind would have already spiraled out of control, but you—”

“I’m not good like you. You saw the things I’ve done. Things, by the way, I didn’t want you to see.”

Ignoring his words, I said, “I saw a demon clinging to humanity, who tried to protect his sister while making mistakes.”

“Prudence.” Shepherd’s jaw tightened. “Please, stop searching through my mind.”

My gut churned as I reached for him. I hesitated at first... Would he reject me? When he let me grasp his hand, I exhaled. “I can’t help it, Shepherd. I go to you when I’m sleeping, even if that means into your past.”

“Try to see me for who I am and not who I was. You’ve viewed enough of my mistakes. Don’t go looking for more.” The veins on his neck jumped as he searched my face. “You’re my mate.”

## Page 49

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

His body tensed further, and I wondered if he was happy. I wished his bond to my soul shared his emotions with me like he knew mine.

“You mentioned this before.” My voice was steady, but I knew he would still sense my hurt.

He touched my cheek as he leaned in. “Let me claim you as mine, Princess. I don’t know what kind of monster I’ll become without you.” He lifted my chin, and our eyes met. My pulse skyrocketed. “There can be no one else for you.”

My heart pounded against my ribcage. “If your gremlin is right, then it’s not me, but my stench that attracts you.”

“What?” Shepherd glowered.

“My lust,” I explained.

“I know what you’re talking about, but I don’t understand why the fuck you’re saying it like that.” His jaw clenched as he grasped the back of my neck and brought us nose to nose. “You are more than your curse, Prudence. Do you hear me?”

Shepherd’s words got through to me. Wow. Butterflies swam in my stomach. That’s it. I was more than my curse. Just like he was more than his self-loathing. My soul reaper... Oh, already, he had no idea how much he’d done for my self-worth.

My hands went to his face, caressing his cheeks. His breath warmed my lips and desire tingled my skin. “And you’re more than your past.”

He froze but didn't let me go. "Did you trick me into this conversation so you could say that?"

"No, I simply stated the truth." I smiled. There was something hungry in Shepherd's grunt right before he crushed his lips over mine. I opened for him instantly and moaned when his tongue delved inside.

Shepherd sighed as he pulled away. "It's hard not to kiss you when you smile."

I bumped my nose against his. "And when we're this close together?"

"That doesn't help."

I licked his lips, and he groaned. "You pulled me in first," I said.

"Don't change the subject," Shepherd countered and snatched my arm. "You let Dirk hurt you. Given what he is, you know that will only make him worse."

"He's not wrong though. Without the bond and my curse, would you still be here?"

He put distance between us and raised a brow. "Answer me this. Am I more than your fuck boy? Would you have me around if you weren't cursed?"

My mouth slackened as I pondered his question. How could I know when all I've ever known was my curse? Because of my sin, I isolated myself. Maybe, if Lust didn't exist inside me, I could have been free spirited or something else. Or I'd still be me with my black clothes and guarded heart.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know who I'd be without my curse."

"Did you think of your curse when you kissed me? Or when my face was between

your thighs last night?" he asked.

My clit throbbed. "No."

"You're life to me. You gave me feelings when I had wished for none. Tell me what to do and I'll be better." Covering his eyes, he exhaled softly. "Let me learn about you, because this demon before you has only been existing, waiting to die."

My heart thrummed as a fuzzy feeling covered me from tip to toe.

Shepherd caressed my cheek. "Until you."

My throat tickled, and my eyes watered. I couldn't speak. If I dared blink, I might cry. Although we barely knew one another, in that moment, I felt as if I'd walked beside him for centuries. Because of my soul reaper, I'd never have to keep my feelings bottled in. For that, I'd make sure he enjoyed life.

And without words, I knew he sensed all the emotions coursing through me. He broke the silence by rubbing my shoulder gently. "So don't be hurt by Dirk's words. Although he hides it, he wants to get to know you. I've known him enough to know what he's doing. As gremlins, they only know how to be mischievous and mean spirited to gain attention. I won't let them come around you until they learn to behave."

My shoulders sagged. "No, forget it. That will make Dirk behave worse."

"Believe it or not, Dirk has improved since meeting me."

"You can't get rid of them, can you?" I asked.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“No. I can’t,” he replied.

Did he really say fuck boy earlier? The silly soul reaper was so much more.

A laugh bubbled up, and I fought to stifle it. No use. It broke through—a guffaw so loud it bounced off the walls. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I said, “F-fuck boy!”

Shepherd said nothing.

Holding my sides, I asked, “What made you say such a thing?”

His entire face lit up with his grin. “Been holding that in, have you?”

I giggled some more.

“Come on. I want to go some place.”

Composing myself, I asked, “Where?”

“Anywhere. Wherever you want to go.”

Thirteen

Shepherd

“A drive-in?” Prudence’s nose crinkled as she looked at all the cars and trucks parked

in front of the giant blank screen. “No wonder you asked for a blanket.”

Holding the covering over one arm, I took her hand in mine, interlacing our fingers together. A swell of happiness lodged in my throat at how easily she accepted my touch. A mundane film probably didn’t seem like much for an immortal. I almost didn’t take her because of that, but I missed out on a lot of living over the decades. With her, I had a thirst to enjoy the moment. Given how much Prudence worked, she needed the distraction.

Removing my hand, I reached into my pocket for my cigarettes and lighter. “Are you disappointed?” I asked as we walked up the hill. It was a distance from the screen but was private. Maybe the seclusion would convince Prudence to stay.

I sensed her stare as I lit the cigarette.

“So, that’s why you taste and smell slightly of smoke,” she stated.

Oh yeah, it would be the first time I smoked around her. “You want me to stop?” I asked.

She smiled lightly, eyes roving over me once before looking at the screen. “I don’t mind the smell of you.”

I relaxed, but a yearning to hold her filled me and stiffened my cock. It seemed that my mate wanted to torture me. “So immortals never pick up any bad habits?” I said, attempting to distract my desire.

Prudence laughed, and her eyes sparkled. The slight smile she gave me made her even more beautiful. If she kept that up, I’d spend the entire night sporting a hard-on.

“I think rubbing my clit growing up was enough of an obsession. I don’t need

anymore.”

“Couldn’t have been easy,” I said. “How did your family become cursed?”

“The Devil,” she muttered. “He cursed us because my father and mother slowed the spread of his evil. All he’s ever wanted was to end the world, and it appears he’s finally achieving his dream.”

“I thought Harvest was the one who started this mess?”

“He was, but in the end, we’ll have to worry about both of them.”

“What happens when this is over? Or when it ends?”

Instead of answering me, she glanced back at all the vehicles waiting to enter the lot. “We should have driven your truck.”

That meant taking her to my ratty-ass trailer and explaining about my pathetic existence. It was bad enough she peeked inside my memories and saw things I wanted to keep private. I realized it was all a feeble attempt to hold on to some dignity with her, but it mattered.

“Portal chips are so much more convenient.” I wanted to kick my ass for not getting one sooner.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“What movie is playing?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Is this spot okay?” We were right in the center of the hill with a perfect angle for her to lay back and still be at a good level with the screen.

She nodded, and I laid out the blanket. Prudence sat down and cradled her knees to her chest. On a sigh, she said, “God, I can’t remember the last time I watched a movie, or read a book for that matter.”

“No wonder with as often as you work.” I studied her for a moment.

We had been slaying demons nonstop all day. Did she not fatigue like a human would? Outwardly, my mate didn’t look tired, but how much did she hide from me? My chest tightened with worry, and I frowned. “Do any of you take a break?”

Prudence faced me, letting her shoulders drop slightly. “It wasn’t always this much work. We had a daily quota for the souls. Plus, we had enough Reapers to help us. While we’ve been busy killing Harvesters, they’re taking out our people too.”

My pulse quickened at her admittance to me. She looked small with her arms wrapped around her legs. Suddenly, I had a strong impulse to touch her. Reaching out, I slipped my fingers through her hair before sliding them down to her cheek. “You’ve been busy, Princess. I’m sorry I found you so late.”

Prudence batted my hand away and dipped her head, but not before I caught the edge of her smile. “I’m hungry. You?”

“With the number of souls I’ve feasted on in the last two days, I could go a month without eating again. When it comes to actual food, however, I’ll never say no. What do you want? I’ll buy it.”

When I stood, she latched onto my wrist. “There’s no need. I can materialize...” The thought died as she removed her hand. “Actually, I’ll take nachos and cheese, please. And a large coke. Should I go with you to help you carry it?”

“No. I got it.”

“Do you have money?”

I quirked a brow. “Which one of us lives in the human world?”

Her pretty lips turned up, and she waved her arm.

Six minutes later, I dropped a bag of junk food onto her lap. As I sat down, Prudence reached for her nachos while sitting the bag between us.

I chuckled and handed the chips with cheese and her drink over.

“You didn’t want anything?”

Digging into the bag, I removed a package of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. Holding them in front of her face, I shook the candy. “Chocolate for me.”

She smacked her lips together, eyeing the treat.

“There’s more in the bag. I didn’t know what you’d want.”

The movie started, and it looked like some chick flick. Prudence licked her lips, eyes

focused on her nachos when she groaned. It reminded me of her flushed expression as she sucked my cock the night before. My body jolted, and I focused my attention on the screen. Ah, fuck. I wanted to eat her up. Why did everything she do seem so sensual and sweet?

“Ahh...” Prudence sighed happily, tilting her head. “It’s the little things like this that humans take for granted. Doing nothing is always the most fun.”

“Maybe because doing nothing sounds like perfection to an immortal who works nonstop?” I wiped the cheese from her chin, and she thanked me. My nerve endings came to life and my skin tingled. My princess gave me her time, her smile, and her attention—precious gifts I didn’t feel like I deserved.

“True,” she admitted. “It’s scary to think of what will become of this world if Reapers fail.”

Sensing her fear, my heart plummeted, and bile rose to my mouth. As I rubbed her knee, I said, “Don’t talk like that.”

Shaking her head, she looked at me. “Enough about my world. Let’s talk about you. You have money, so you have a job. Right?”

It was the conversation I dreaded. “It’s a contract gig.”

She leaned into me, bumping my shoulder with hers. “That tells me nothing.”

“I kill people.”

Her eyes bulged. “You’re a hitman?”

## Page 52

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“It’s a good way to feed myself,” I blurted. “I never eat someone’s soul unless they deserve death. Not after...” Acid filled my mouth. Thankfully, Prudence hadn’t delved that deep into my memories. I wasn’t ready to talk about the moment her father came to me.

“Hey,” she murmured. I nearly swallowed my tongue as her beautiful azure gaze met mine. “I kill bad guys every day without remorse. Your kind can sense good and evil, can’t they?”

“Yes.” I exhaled. “When I first became a soul reaper, I couldn’t tell the difference.”

She smiled softly. “I know.”

God, I didn’t deserve her. I slumped forward as the tension drained from me. Prudence settled herself between my legs and put my arms around her waist. My heart relaxed as if she cradled it in the palm of hand, protecting it from harm.

Muttering something about being cold, Prudence materialized another blanket. Covering herself, she burrowed deeper within my embrace and blood rushed to my cock.

“There are a lot of places you must take me after this movie, Soul Reaper. A lot of demonic activity needs to be handled,” she mumbled, wiggling herself against me.

“Oh yeah?” Holding her tightly in my arms, I buried my face against her neck. Every time I kissed along her collarbone or blew across her pebbled skin, she shuddered.

“Yeah,” she agreed breathlessly.

My body shimmered, bones and flesh threatening to fade away as my emotions grew. Closing my eyes, I breathed in her candy scent. My soul desired to touch her too, but it would have to wait. Reeling myself in, I reveled in her being in my arms. Being mine. With her, I'd always teeter between my darkest desires to possess her and hoping she'd stay beside me. Prudence was a balancer of life and death. Her existence would stabilize all the ugly and good inside me.

As the movie went on, Prudence curled against my lap and watched. I took in the beautiful way she pressed into me while laughing and clutching my arms. Suddenly, my throat tickled, making it hard to swallow. I was mesmerized and equally terrified of losing the happiness I found with her.

I'll live for all her small reactions to the world and me.

“You'll what?” Prudence murmured.

I paused, not realizing I spoke out loud. “What?” I echoed.

“You didn't say anything?”

“I don't remember.”

My mated turned slightly. “Are you even watching the movie?”

“I'd rather watch you.”

Her chest rose and fell, then she smiled before tucking herself against me. Prudence kept burrowing herself into me like she wished for us to be one. “Oh.” Happiness spilled out through the bond, and I couldn't resist squeezing her tightly.

“You like that, don’t you?” I teased.

“What do you mean?”

“My. Eyes. On. You.”

Her body vibrated against mine. I suspected Prudence tried to suppress her giggles.

“Yes, actually I do, but you’re missing a funny movie.”

“I think I’ve made you smile more than the screen has.”

“Oh, my Hades.” She exhaled, and her mouth stretched ear to ear.

We were quiet for a few minutes as she focused on the movie. Then she started squirming. I eased her off my hard cock. Not tonight, dude. No matter how good she felt against said instrument or how amazing she smelled, I wanted the moment with her more.

Abruptly, she blurted, “I can’t get into it now.”

I chuckled. “Why?”

“Because I’d rather talk to you.”

My heart hammered in my ribcage as my skin grew warm. My arms shook around her, so I lowered them briefly. “I’m all yours, Princess.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Do you know how to play UNO?” she asked randomly.

I quirked a brow. “Yes, but how do you?”

“Don’t look so surprised. My mom was a human once. She made sure we were all introduced to the things she loved growing up.” Prudence placed the blanket around her shoulders and materialized a deck of cards before facing me with her legs crisscrossed. “Now, my soul reaper, you can look at me. Let’s play.”

All I heard was my soul reaper. The rest didn’t matter. Being with her did.

Fourteen

Prudence

Dreaming always led me to Shepherd and places I shouldn’t be...

Sometimes bad choices become equally bad habits. My hunger for slipping through people turned into a compulsion. I didn’t know what I was or why I was slaying anyone, but I craved the slightly sweet tang of euphoria that quivered my shadowy form after each kill.

Every few days, I visited Tiffany and witnessed the bad choices she kept repeating. She held out on a college education and worked full time at the diner. Her life was at a standstill, and I hated the reason why.

Slipping through the trailer door, I found Tiffany at the table with her laptop open.

Looking over her shoulder, I would have smiled and patted her back if I could. Open on the screen were several tabs for colleges. Her phone beeped, and she smiled as she scooped it up.

Pick one. We'll go anywhere. We'll leave this town tomorrow.

The text was from her boyfriend, Drake. She'd been seeing him for the last six months. He was a good kid. I didn't have to get rid of him like the one before. And I would have if I needed to. Finally, someone was trying to get my sister out of that shithole. I was happy for her.

"What are you looking at?" I backed away quickly, careful not to touch our dad when he walked up behind Tiffany.

"Nothing." Getting flustered, Tiffany tried closing the laptop, but he stopped her.

"You're looking at colleges?" he asked.

"Yeah, I am."

Dad scratched his chin and sighed. "You ain't going to college. You're too much like your mother. She was all beauty, but not much for brains. Your brother was the same way. Why do you think he chose the coal mines instead of getting an education? He wasn't smart enough."

I didn't care what he thought of me, but I never liked how he badmouthed Mom.

"Dad!" Tiffany yelled. "Why are you always saying mean things? Mom loved you! And Shepherd..." Tiffany rose to her feet and whirled around. "He chose the quickest way to make money, so we could leave!"

Dad cackled. “Right. He got out of town and left us all alone. Stop speaking so high and mighty of someone who abandoned his family.”

“That’s not true,” she whispered. “You know it’s not.”

“Stop it, Tiffany! They never found a body. Your brother isn’t dead. He left us.”

“Wrong! He wouldn’t have destroyed the bike he worked so hard for. Something happened to him, Dad, but I can’t get anyone to help me find out. So, I’m going to do what I know he would have wanted, and I’m going to leave.”

“Say whatever makes you feel better about abandoning me.”

Tiffany stepped back, but her foot caught the chair leg, tripping her. Her tears finally spilled over her cheeks. Dad didn’t offer her a hand up. He just shook his head. Rage built inside of me. Hot anger rippled my form, bunching it erratically like a black pulsating cloud. I wouldn’t let his demeaning words change her choices.

Rushing forward, I slipped through my father. He gasped and slumped to the ground beside Tiffany.

“Dad!” she screamed as she shook him. Flipping him on his back, I watched her confirm he was dead.

Only then did it hit me what I had done. Oh, fuck! Right in front of Tiffany, too! Panic overcame me as I moved backward.

“Hello, Shepherd.”

The male voice caught me by surprise, and I turned around. I had never seen the cloaked male in my life, but instinctively, I knew exactly who he was. The Grim

Reaper. My urge to flee intensified and my form quivered.

## Page 54

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“You sense who I am, don’t you?” He tipped his hood back and revealed a man with dark hair.

“You’re here to kill me,” I said.

“No. Not yet, anyway, but I will if you continue on this path.”

Feeling more confused than ever, I confessed, “I don’t know what I’ve become.”

“A soul reaper,” Grim said.

“A soul reaper?”

“That’s what you are now.”

“Is this what humans become after dying?”

Grim smirked. “You never died, and you were never human. Your true identity has been dormant. Your instinct to survive awakened your true nature and saved your life. You’re a demon.”

“Demon? How? My parents were human.”

“Not both of them. Your mother was a human who slept with a soul reaper.” My eyes darted to Tiffany on the phone with the ambulance. “Your sister is human, don’t worry. Her father isn’t yours.”

I couldn't believe Grim's words. The piece of shit on the floor... The man I'd always tried so hard to please and earn his love wasn't my father.

"I speak the truth," Grim stated, knowing I needed to hear it again.

"So I'm a soul reaper? What exactly is that?"

"A demon who survives by eating souls. Very few of your kind exist. Driven by their need for souls, they plunder and kill ruthlessly. Reapers have hunted and killed most of you. Your recklessness is how I found you."

"Souls," I uttered slowly. That meant I ate the soul of my sister's father. "That's what I've been taking from them?"

"Yes."

Learning the truth sent a sharp pain through me. "Just do it. End me," I said. According to the Grim Reaper, though, I'd always been a vile thing. "I don't want to roam this world as I am."

"You can change back into your human form, you know," he said. "Soul Reapers have two forms—reaping and human."

"What?"

"Don't ask me how because I'm not one of you." Grim glanced at Tiffany clinging to her father's corpse. "Her father wasn't a good soul, but he wasn't completely bad. He was capable of salvation, but you stole it from him. He wasn't the only one. You took away a chance of deliverance for a lot of people. Do you understand what I'm telling you, Shepherd? To live as what you are, you must learn the difference between good and bad. If I come for you a second time, it won't be a warning. I don't care how

many of the wicked ones you devour. Although your actions help me in the long run, don't take the good souls and ruin their chance for an afterlife."

"Prudence," Shepherd barked. "Get the fuck out of my head."

My eyes shot open, and I bolted upright in my bed. Oh, Hades. I explored his memories again when he pleaded with me not to. My heart pounded. I'd never heard Shepherd so furious.

Dressed in a loose pair of black shorts, Shepherd ported into my room. I clutched the cover as he clenched his jaws tightly. "Would it kill you to stop peeking inside my mind?"

"I didn't mean to upset you," I said calmly.

"Cut the bull, Princess. You were searching. Just like on the first night when you went looking for my dick in a dream."

His words stung my chest, and I recoiled as if he'd slapped me. I wasn't accustomed to that version of Shepherd. "It happens subconsciously while I sleep."

His eyes slanted. "How does that happen? Prudence, I asked you not to do it."

"Just like you're compelled to be around me because of your bond, I can't help it." Because he was my soulmate and my obsession, I couldn't stop plucking through his mind. I yearned to know about my soulmate, including his secrets. But I couldn't tell him any of that for fear he'd reject me.

"What difference does it make now that you know I killed the man I thought was my father? Nothing. It wouldn't change anything between us because you're waiting for someone else, right? A soulmate?"

What?

“Buthowis that when you’re my soul’s—” Shepherd cut himself off and dragged his fingers through his hair. When our eyes met, my heart felt like needles were jabbed into it.

How did he come to this misunderstanding?

“Know what pisses me off more than you knowing my past? The fact that you weren’t curious. Were you searching for something?” My throat tightened, and my eyes watered as he spoke. “Probably something bad, right?” He rubbed his chest as the pain shined in his eyes. God, were his eyes wet too? “Whatever you were looking for, I’m glad you found it. Find someone else to babysit you today, Princess.”

My jaw dropped.

What was he talking about?

Yes, I was curious, but I wasn’t looking for anything.

Something bad?

Did he really think he was such a horrible demon? He was perfect for me. I adored him even more for everything he’d overcome. “Shepherd—”

“Don’t worry about the wilting. I’ll survive a day without seeing you.”

Purple flower petals fell to his feet from his torso. His gaze lingered for a moment before he frowned. Shepherd kicked the petals and then ported out of my room.

You're waiting for someone else, right? A soulmate?

Oh, Shepherd, you are my soulmate!

Anger hit me suddenly. I huffed and flung my pillow across the room.

The fury dissipated quickly as I cradled my knees. How could he know that when I hadn't told him the truth about the marks? I didn't know why he thought there was someone else, but there would only be him.

What have I done?

I should have let him tell me on his own time.

Fifteen

Shepherd

"You're not going to see her?" Dirk sighed as he watched me.

Taking a swig of my beer and ignoring the pain in my chest, I aligned the cue stick.  
"Nope."

Dirk grunted. "I don't care one way or another, but you're awfullywiltyagain." He pointed at the cluster of purple flowers at my feet.

"That's not a word," I told him.

“It should be for Soul Reapers,” he stated. “So what happened?”

“Nothing.”

I fucked up.

No matter how upset I was, I shouldn't have spoken to Prudence the way I did. When I cruelly mentioned the dreams, her cautious response replayed inside my head. I felt like I walked on clouds when she came to me in my sleep. Then, in a moment of anger, I ruined something special by throwing her actions in her face. Prudence already saw herself dirty because of her curse. She was so much more than that to me.

Last night had been amazing. Playing cards, watching her laugh, and having her open up to me—fuck, she was perfect. My breath seized, remembering how quickly she paled and those trembling lips as I yelled.

I was still upset with her for intruding upon my memories, but no one loathed me more than me. What did my princess think of me after learning about my shame?

Fuck soulmates. Fuckhersoulmate. Fuck the bond.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

She was mine. I wanted her because she made me whole. I could make her happy. At least, I did.

I wanted to go to her, but how could I face her again? No one's ever pushed me so far. No one's ever made me feel so deeply either. I loved her smile, and her affection toward me.

I fucked up everything.

"The princess probably doesn't want to see me," I grumbled and stood tall.

"What did she do now?" Dirk asked.

Fury gripped me, filling my veins as he complained about Prudence once again. "Shut the fuck up. She didn't do anything." I scowled. "If you don't start treating her with respect, you'll be gone. I'm your master. What I say is law."

Something in Dirk's yellow gaze brightened before he bowed low. His silence unnerved me.

My cell phone buzzed. Peering at the screen, I saw a new job notification. Honestly, I ate enough souls working with Prudence. I had no need to accept the contract. I exhaled painfully. From that moment on, I only wanted to live for Prudence. I denied the job and returned the device to my pocket.

Petals fell at my feet.

Iachedto be with her.

Sixteen

Prudence

“Who’s the watchdog?” I asked Joy as we raided a vampire den in L.A. “I’ve never seen him before.”

She glanced over her shoulder and tensed. Her focus seemed to be on a warlock in a black cloak. “His name’s Derrick. Dad found him for my bodyguard.”

“What’s so special about the warlock?”

“Shh,” she snapped before her lips curled, displaying teeth. “He might hear you. And he’s a proxy.”

That piqued my interest. “A proxy?” Joy gave me a look that screamed, if-you-don’t-shut-up-I’m-going-to-murder-you. “Do you think Dad brought him in to counter Nova?”

It felt weird saying her name aloud. The fact that the witch, who worked for Harvest, could be August’s soulmate made Nova a touchy topic. My brother didn’t take it well, and he’d been MIA since. But Nova was extremely powerful. As immortals, we still struggled against her, and if she was my brother’s marked mate, that meant she was immortal too. Double trouble.

Derrick slowly approached us. I frowned as Joy rubbed her flushed cheek and sighed. If I didn’t know better, I would say Joy was high. But Joy didn’t consume human alcohol or witch elixirs.

“Will you be with us all day?” Derrick’s gaze landed on me.

I took a good look at the lanky man with the dark hair and eyes. I’d admit he was handsome.

Instead of answering, I asked Joy, “Hey, you okay?”

“Yes.” She rubbed her neck and yawned. When she caught me staring, she glared. “What?”

When was the last time she slept? Joy was never grumpy.

“She’s been like this for days,” Derrick said.

“Derrick,” Joy warned.

I stepped toward her. “How has she been?”

“Your sister yells at me like she might snap my head off. A second later, she’s apologizing for it.”

Joy cringed at his words. “Sorry.”

“See what I mean?” Derrick quirked his brow at me, and then he turned slightly and winked at Joy. “Don’t worry. I still find you’re very sweet.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

Oh, Payne wasn't going to like Derrick when he saw him flirt with Joy. But more than that, I didn't know what to think of Joy's behavior. What Derrick said didn't sound like my beloved sister. We couldn't get sick, but we could be poisoned or cursed. Fear gripped me as I reached out for Joy, but she backed up.

"Stop," I snapped. When I touched her forehead, searing pain coursed through my fingers. I hissed. Joy smacked my hand away and glared at me.

"That's why I didn't want you to touch me!"

Her cold words made me flinch as if I'd been slapped. My darling sister didn't have a mean bone in her body. Yet she bared her teeth at me like I was her worst enemy. She looked sweaty, too. And a little redder than just a minute prior.

"Joy," I panicked. "You're hot as a flame. My skin would have blistered if I touched you a second longer."

"I'm fine," she brushed me off and walked the opposite direction.

"Don't turn away from me. You're not fine," I said.

"I'm a healer, Prudence," Joy muttered. "I know my body."

Really?

All I saw was my sister neglecting her health. I frowned at her retreating form. Something about her condition seemed so familiar. Why couldn't I figure it out?

“Might I suggest leaving her alone?” Derrick said. “She looks prettyheatedright now.”

Ignoring him, I caught up to my sister and yanked her cloak. “Joy,please.Talk to me. Let’s go to the castle. You need Mom or Melinda to look at you.”

Thankfully, Joy didn’t lash out. Instead, she bit her lip and exhaled loudly. Facing me, she mumbled, “I just need to rest.”

“You need more than that,” I countered.

“This isn’t what you think,” she began. “It’s him.”

Him?

“Joy—”

“I’m sorry. Let Derrick stay with you today. I need to rest.”

“Go to Mom.”

Shrugging, Joy faded, leaving me with the warlock.

Breaking the silence, he said, “Your sister is a loose cannon.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s hot, then cold. At first, I thought that might be her personality.” He scratched his chin. “Until you looked alarmed by it.”

What in Hades was happening? Sending a text to the family, I made sure one of us

found out what Joy was hiding.

---

I was at a human's house ascending a soul when a lot of shouting interrupted my work. The voice sounded eerily familiar. It was a wonder how I heard Derrick coughing through all of it. "Do you know this thing? It says you're its...um...his lady?"

Whipping around, I saw Dirk, kicking and screaming, dangling by his shirt collar from Derrick's hand. "Unhand me this instant. Sire will eat you. Prudence knows who I am."

"Let him go," I said.

Instantly, Derek dropped Dirk on his ass.

"Come to pick a fight today, fiend?" I asked, then sniffed and looked away.

## Page 58

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

Oh, man. Just seeing Dirk made my heart twist. The ugly gremlin made me think of his sire and my argument with him.

Gods, I missed Shepherd. I didn't know if it was because of the mark or what. Whatever it was, I hated being at odds with him.

"I've come in Sire's place." Dirk glowered at Derrick and then dusted off his pants and crossed his arms. "Why is this warlock with you?"

"In Sire's place?" I asked instead of answering Dirk.

The gremlin nodded. "Sire's terribly distraught but impossibly stubborn." Dirk glanced back at Derrick. "Give us some privacy."

Derrick complained and walked a couple houses down. Dirk watched him a while before facing me. "What happened between you and Sire?"

I hoped I kept my expression neutral. "Why would have something happened?"

"Because Sire would spend every second with you if allowed. Why is he fighting to stay away today?"

He's fighting to stay away?

The ache in my chest paused. Shepherd still wanted to see me, but he refused to. My stomach knotted. "I don't know."

It was a lie. I knew exactly what made him keep his distance.

The gremlin watched me for a long, uncomfortable minute. “This is why you’re no good for Sire.”

Tucking my hair behind my ear, I asked, “How much do you know of Shepherd’s past?”

“Ah, so that’s what you’ve done.” Dirk exhaled. “My master has a sister he goes to visit often. Her name is Tiffany, but that’s all I know.”

Somehow, I didn’t believe that. “Then why do you loyally serve Shepherd?”

Dirk thumped his chest twice. “Sometimes all it takes is a few moments in someone’s presence to know what kind of person they are. I knew who he was to me the second I saw him. That’s all that matters to me.” Sticking his hand in his pocket, he removed a purple petal. My heart fluttered painfully as he held it out to me. “Stop looking at the past. There’s nothing there for you. The present is what should concern you.”

“I’ve never once ran from Shepherd. He’s the one that ran the second I did something he didn’t like. I’m a Reaper, Dirk. If he can’t handle me digging my claws into his secrets, I’ll never share mine.”

The gremlin was silent for a while before he said, “But you will?”

“Will what?”

“Share yourself with him?”

I laughed at how absurd the gremlin was. “I’m giving him all of me.”

Dirk blinked his beady beige eyes, and then his lips curled. “Does Sire know that?” When I didn’t speak, the gremlin continued. “My master is a benevolent soul reaper. Most would have fallen prey to the bond and claimed you by force, yet he hurts himself to give you space. He’s a worthy male.”

“He’s not giving me space. He’s upset with me.”

“More with himself than you.” Holding his hands behind his back, Dirk added, “Sometimes we all need to be pushed.”

My mouth fell open. Did he compliment me for pushing his master too far?

Coughing suddenly, Dirk pressed his portal chip and disappeared without another word.

Seventeen

Shepherd

I didn’t make it a full day. It was impossible when my heart ached. I wasn’t where I wanted to be. I missed Prudence. A half day away from her felt like I ingested a lethal dose of toxins.

Before the sun rose in the human world, I went to her. I ported directly to her like I had the previous morning. She was at her father’s, sleeping in her childhood room. Guilt churned my gut as I thought about the angry words I had spewed.

## Page 59

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

Prudence lay beneath a gray cover in the center of the bed. My chest cracked open and all the longing I'd ignored came flooding out. I wanted nothing more than to slip beneath the blanket with her, but I hesitated. Maybe the time we spent apart was enough for her to realize I was unworthy.

Those weren't Prudence's feelings. They belonged to me, and I wanted to let them go. I had to stop projecting my emotions onto her. She hadn't spoken ill of me since our first encounter. Instead, she was open and sweet to me. Not to mention my princess gave me what little existed of her free time. Her life as a Reaper was hectic, and yet she allowed me to stay by her side.

Crawling onto the bed, she stirred. A breath escaped her lips as I loomed over her, my legs straddling her hips.

"Shepherd?" she called out in a sleep-filled voice.

In the darkened room, Prudence's eyes were vibrant and so beautiful. My body trembled under her weighty stare. I wanted her all to myself. Her affection was mine alone because no one else could adore her as I would. It didn't matter what her father said.

When she turned onto her back, I said. "Aren't you worried I'll devour you while you're asleep?"

"Hmm?" she hummed softly, then curled her arms around my neck.

Suddenly, I breathed easier. Just like that, we were okay. Whenever I experienced

heightened emotions around Prudence, I had a deep desire to change forms. My soul begged to touch her. In time.

“I’m sorry,” I said as I dropped beside her and pulled her toward me.

Her palm flattened against my chest. “No, I’m sorry. I should have explained myself better.” She traced a finger over my muscle, causing goose bumps even though I still wore my shirt. “As a Reaper, we usually read a person within the first few seconds of encountering someone. But I didn’t with you. I was afraid of what I’d find.”

“You can do that to anyone you meet?” I asked, burying my nose in her hair. Her familiar scent soothed something deep inside me. It was more than sexual. With Prudence, I experienced a sense of belonging.

“Yes. It’s how we learn a person’s death date. For us to pass judgement on where a human goes in the afterlife, we need to know their past.”

“That can’t be easy. I’m sure you’ve experienced some bad memories.”

“Oh, I have. I’ve also been inside the heads of a few soul reapers too.”

I stiffened, and she paused a second before resuming her trail over my shirt.

“But you’re nothing like them.”

I exhaled loudly. “I’m not?”

“No. But when I first saw you, I was angry and scared.”

I lifted my head. “Why?”

She froze above me. First my mate's fear pressed down on me through the bond, then it was her nervousness that bubbled my stomach. "As soon as I saw you, I sensed you were going to be a part of my life and that terrified me."

My heart swelled. Prudence had more to say, but her worried expression kept me from pushing her to continue. What was she too nervous to say?

I brushed my fingers through her hair, hoping the princess didn't wait too long to open up completely. She had given me so much, but I needed more of her.

"Not reading you on our first encounter made my curiosity worse. My desire to discover your secrets grew. Not that it was okay to peek at your memories," she murmured.

"You kept going back for more," I stated.

Pushing up on her elbow, she looked at me. When her breath tickled my chin, a rush of excitement hit me.

"No more. I promise," she whispered.

"Mm-hmm," I hummed. "Curiosity normally kills the cat."

Prudence laughed lightly, but it broke off when I abruptly pushed her on her back and climbed above her. Her cheeks reddened as she watched me.

"You're lucky you're my princess."

Her happiness flowed across the bond. Prudence brushed her fingers down my cheek. "Soul Reaper, your shadows are coming out."

## Page 60

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

My eyes bulged. I slid my hand across the right side of my face. It was solid, but when I touched the left nothing was there. Looking at my hand beside Prudence's head, it was just a black mass.

"It's okay," she whispered.

I stared down at her rosy cheeks and bright smile. More joy filled my being. My soul wanted to burst out of my flesh and bones to claim her. There was nothing natural about my reaper form, yet she accepted it, anyway. "Prudence..."

Slipping her palm around the back of the head, Prudence pulled me down.

Someone knocked, and we froze.

"Prudence?" It was a woman—maybe one of her sisters. "Everything okay? I felt someone's presence. I wanted to check before Payne barged in."

I went rigid, hands twitching to break something at the mention of his name. Prudence patted my shoulder softly, and I glanced at her. Despite her bright grin, my nostrils flare. There was nothing amusing about Payne entering her room.

"Everything's good, Kitty. It's my soul reaper," Prudence called out while watching me closely.

My?

Each time she said it, my chest swelled. There was nothing I wanted more than to be

claimed by the one I called mine. But fuck Payne. I loathed that Reaper being near my mate.

“That’s what I thought, but it never hurts to be sure.” There was a pause on the other side of the door. “Hi, Prudence’s soul reaper. Try to go easy on her. Reapers have good ears.”

“Oh, God. Get the fuck out of the hallway and drink some milk.” Prudence groaned and covered her face.

“That’s a good idea. Can you materialize me some in the kitchen? Oh, and some of those sandwich cookies to dunk.” Kitty said. Her footfalls padded down the hall.

“Payne lives here?” I piped in.

“Don’t you start.” Prudence huffed. “He’s like a brother.”

“So that’s ayes?”

“It is. A lot of extra security has been put in place since the human festival,” Prudence muttered, pushing at my chest.

I didn’t move. “I’m not leaving.”

She gawked at me before bursting into a fit of giggles. “What about the gremlins?”

“What gremlins?”

“Come here.” She tried to pull me in for a hug.

“Up,” I said instead. “Let’s get some work done, then I’m taking you to your place.”

As soon as I moved, she leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. I rubbed the spot as she jumped out of bed. She glanced down at her black nightie and then closed her eyes. After several seconds, she opened them and looked down again.

Sensing her confusion, I asked, “Do you want me to dress you?”

Holding the flimsy fabric up, she frowned. “What...”

“What is it?”

A tight black shirt and pants materialized, replacing the gown. Tapping her chin, she hummed. “That’s strange.”

“What is?”

“It took a second for my clothes to materialize.” She shrugged. “Come on.”

---

## Page 61

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

I lost track of how many places and demons I'd devoured as Prudence and I roamed the Underworld.

"What is it?" I kicked a carcass with my boot. Before Prudence cut him down, his feathered arms extended into massive wings that dwarfed his scrawny frame. He had beady eyes and a beak for a mouth.

"Bird demon," Prudence said, closing the dark passage after descending the evil soul.

I only flinched a little as the overwhelming mass of evil and fear manifested within. "Bird demon?" My forehead creased. "That's it?"

Prudence placed a hand on her hip. "A lot of creatures are given names not easily pronounced, so we call them for what they look like." She pointed at the creature's beak. "Obviously, this one's a bird."

"Hmm, well, I'm eating the next one," I said before shimmering back to my reaping form.

She waved her sword. "Hold it right there." I froze. "I want to kill some too."

"Prudence." I groused.

Patting my shoulder, she winked. "I won't descend their souls. You can eat them. Happy?"

The flapping of wings sounded overhead. Glancing up, I saw a horde of the demon

birds hovering. “Reaper!” One of them squawked. “Your days are numbered!”

Prudence’s sword morphed into a chain, and her vibrant pink essence swirled around it. Letting it glide around her, she eyed the fiends. “Oh, brother. We’ve made them mad.”

“Spread out!” another screeched as Prudence’s chain shot up. Airborne, the cable stretched like a snake slithering through grass.

The fact that Reapers could materialize anything at will and transform their scythes into anything they wanted amazed me.

Prudence gave a crooked smile as she crossed her arms. The woman was clearly in her element. Her weapon zigzagged between the demons. Bones cracked as the chain pierced its first victim. The link burst through a chest, spewing blood everywhere. The demon stretched, eyes widening, and a feminine wail rang out as the body fell to the ground.

Prudence sighed as she glared at the bird woman. “Your people have done good for centuries before listening to Harvest. Killing innocents won’t be ignored.”

“Kill us.” She hissed and then laughed. “I don’t regret sinking my teeth into that banshee’s babe.”

Anger flared in my chest. Snarling, I shouted, “Kill them, or I will!”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” Prudence shouted.

A black-winged male swooped down toward her. I rippled and moved, but she cut through him before I could do anything. Blood poured from the demon’s mouth, and his body flew through the air as Prudence flung him off the chain.

Two more descended. The essence around Prudence's weapon faded before her chain dissolved. Not knowing what she planned to do, I looked at her for a clue. Prudence's face paled as she glanced down at her hands.

"Prudence!" I yelled. What was she doing? The demons were still coming.

Her head lifted. Bracing her feet, she gritted her teeth and raised her arms. Where was her scythe? I rushed through a demon, inhaling the evil soul quickly. The second one collided with Prudence, and she grabbed the woman's forearms.

"What's this?" The female bird purred, licking her lips at Prudence. "I smell mortal."

"Get off of her!" I lunged for them.

Too late!

Prudence's feet left the ground. I could hardly see Prudence because of the demon's wings. Before I could get to them, the bird squawked and fell. A few droplets of blood splattered the ground as their feet touched the pavement once more.

My heart sank. Was Prudence injured?

No! My mate tackled the demon to the ground.

Thank God.

The last three birdlike creatures swooped to intervene, and I ended them quickly. Peeking back at Prudence, I saw her pummel the female demon's beak. Prudence's fists bled with every blow.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Prudence,” I said as I shifted into my human form.

The sight of her blood was crippling. I didn’t understand why she was hurting herself to attack the demon. The entire time I’d been with her, I’d never once seen my mate use her hands. She allowed her weapon to do everything for her.

“What will Harvest think about this?” the female wheezed.

Prudence stopped and gasped. She held her arm out and a sword materialized, her pink essence bursting to life around it. With a snarl, Prudence lifted the blade. The bird laughed right as the tip of the blade landed between her eyes. Her body twitched, and then her soul rose. I gobbled it up before pulling Prudence into my shaky body.

Her eyes were glassy. She didn’t look at me even when I caressed her cheek. “What was that about?” I demanded. “You could have killed them before you were grabbed.” I didn’t care that she was immortal. I would lose control of myself if I watched her die.

“I don’t know what happened,” she whispered, head lowering as she glanced at her weapon. She lifted the blade and studied it. “Nothing. I sensed nothing for a while.”

What did she mean by nothing?

I was beginning to suspect my princess hadn’t dematerialized her weapon on purpose. Prudence’s overwhelming fear screamed across the bond. The nothing she spoke of was a big deal. And what worried her, worried me.

Something's wrong.

Something's coming.

Eighteen

Prudence

I spent the rest of the day analyzing the way I felt earlier. For the briefest of moments, I felt strange as those parts of me that made me one of Grim's children vanished. My power, my strength, even my immortality wasn't accessible. The incident left me shaken.

As the hours passed, I wanted to think I imagined it all. There was no way that happened. As the day ended, there were no more mishaps. I just imagined it. No way had I lost my powers.

The way my soul reaper hovered around me since the incident let me know he had witnessed it too. For once, I wasn't irritated to have someone near me. His presence was soothing as I worked. More than once, my hands shook around my scythe as I materialized it. Each time I used my power, I expected something to go wrong.

Mortal, the bird demon said.

Oh, Hades. Had she been talking about me?

If that was the case...

"Enough," Shepherd said, before taking my hands in his. "I've let you simmer with your emotions all day. Tell me what happened earlier."

My voice was quiet and shaky as I spoke. “Do you know that my family and I are destined to fade away when the world ends? If the Devil crosses into the mortal world and we fail the humans, we disappear when the Devil creates his new order.”

Shepherd’s eyes turned violet as his skin shimmered slightly. His grip on me tightened. “The end is... What? Five or six months away? Why didn’t you tell me? I can’t stand by and do nothing while you—”

“Shepherd—”

“We just found each other. You can’t leave me, Prudence. Not now. Not ever,” he croaked out.

My eyes watered, and a tickle in my throat made it hard to swallow. Shepherd was right. But it didn’t change the fact that I had found him during such a chaotic time. Why did we cross paths at all if there was a chance we might lose it all?

How did mortals live that way? My heart felt like it was ripping apart at the thought of losing Shepherd.

I closed my eyes and exhaled a shaky breath. “I didn’t say that’s going to happen. It will if we fail, but that’s not the only thing I’m trying to tell you.”

He grabbed my chin, forcing me to open my eyes. “I’m not staying in this world without you, princess. If you think you’re leaving me, think again. There’s nothing left for me if I lose you. You’re the light that I thought would burn for me forever. No one gets to steal you from me. Not even the Devil.”

“It’s not about us. Look at the humans and all the good demons. What will become of them if we lose our powers?”

His jaw tightened. “So that’s what happened earlier?”

My vision blurred. “I’m scared, Shepherd. For the first time, I’m truly unsure. What if it happens again?”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

He wrapped his arms around me, enveloping me in his warm, strong hold. “I know what I need to do.”

“What?”

“For the moments you can’t protect you and others, I’ll do it instead.”

I squeezed him tightly, burying my face against his chest. “There’s so much I’ve yet to tell you.” That you’re actually my soulmate. That my powers will eventually become yours. Or at least until the end. I shook the gloomy thought away. “I need more time for us to talk. You need to know everything.”

“I’ll be waiting, Princess.”

---

Shepherd

“Why did we come to the castle?” Prudence asked as I pointed to her bed. “I thought we were going to my place,” she murmured, not meeting my gaze as she sat down.

“There’s something I must do,” I said. “Rest. You’ve had a long day.”

“Okay.” She frowned and glanced down at her boots. I wanted to stay beside her, but I also wanted to take her worries and make them my own. Regrettably, I had to leave her where she was safe.

“Goodnight.” I kissed her forehead, and she leaned into my touch. It made it that much harder to leave her. I could already feel the petals falling.

“Goodnight,” she whispered.

I ported into the ballroom after leaving Prudence’s room. “Grim!” I called out. “Grim!” I paced the floor until he showed up.

His shirt was half open. He shoved his hands into his unkempt hair. “This better be good.”

There was no need beating around the bush. “I need you to make me a Reaper.”

His eyes widened, and he stopped dead in his tracks. “Why?”

“Why hasn’t anyone told me your family fades away when the end comes?” I practically yelled the words.

He scratched his jaw and sighed. “I’m afraid you’re probably one of the few demons that doesn’t know. I guess if you lived in the Underworld, that would be old news.”

I waved my hand in the air. “Make me one of you. Send me where you need me to be. I’ll do anything to help.”

His forehead crinkled. “Now, I’m curious. What has my daughter done to you?”

“I won’t lose Prudence.” My skin tingled. I glanced at my hand and saw my shadowy mass taking over. “You don’t understand. I desperately want to help.”

I had to help Prudence. If I lost her...

Grim stared at me before I regained control of my form. “You didn’t listen to me before, did you?” he asked with a frown. “Prudence could very well meet her soulmate soon, you know that, right?”

More of my blackened soul bled out of my human form as I scowled. So much for keeping myself under check. “Then I’ll just have to eat him, won’t I?”

“Very well, then. Come here, Shepherd.” Grim waved me forward. I stopped in front of him. He placed his hand on my shoulder and closed his eyes for a moment as his essence barreled out of him. Instead of one color, his was a mixture of black and blue. His grip tightened on me, his eyes shot open, and then his mouth parted. “There’s no point in making you one.” He quirked a brow as he looked me over from head to toe.

“What? Why?” I asked, but he’d already dismissed me, making his way up the stairs. “Don’t walk away,” I growled. “I need to help all of you.”

“Are you wilting?” he called out over his shoulder.

I kicked the petals at my feet. “That’s not important.”

Grim chuckled before facing me. “I can’t make you a Reaper. Shepherd, everything you need to become one is already inside of you. Figure it out. Prudence hasn’t told you, so my lips are sealed. Don’t bother me again. Even my kids know not to bother me at this time of night.”

I had everything I needed to become one.

## Page 64

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

My brows furrowed as I recalled some of Prudence's evasive answers. Most importantly, something she said earlier, "There's so much I've yet to tell you."

My heart pounded. Impossible. I was a soul reaper. There was nothing I possessed that could make me a Reaper.

But...

I rubbed my chest and tried to keep the smile off my face. Giddiness flooded my stomach. Don't get too excited.

I didn't know exactly what Grim meant, but I was ready to find out what I could do. Hopefully, Prudence wouldn't take too long to tell me what I needed to know.

Nineteen

Prudence

I bit the inside of my cheek and sighed. Instead of awakening to Shepherd, I came face to face with three gremlins. Dirk said his sire had something he needed to figure out, but the imp wouldn't tell me what it was. It had to be important to make the soul reaper leave my side.

The events of the day prior still freaked me out. I didn't have the courage to ask my family. Considering no one spoke about it, maybe it was nothing to worry about.

Because of my curse, I'd always been a loner, even around my family. It was

different with my soulmate. Shepherd's absence weighed heavily on my heart. Not that I was actually alone. All three of his fiends followed me while I worked with Payne. And that was apainitself. I'd never seen him so grumpy.

"I don't like him," Dirk stated, glowering at Payne.

"You don't like anyone," I replied.

What in Hades was going on with Payne? He hadn't been happy when I told him we'd have to work together for the day. Frankly, I wasn't happy about the situation either, but with Shepherd gone, I had to have someone with me to keep Dad from losing his shit.

Lately, there had been something creepy about Payne. He'd been prowling the ballroom when I found him. But that was earlier. At the moment, moisture gleamed off his skin, giving him an unnaturally shiny appearance. Everything about him was rigid. With his eyes slanted and nostrils flaring, he seemed so angry. Any time I approached Payne, I did so carefully.

"Want to talk about what's eating you?" I asked.

Scowling, he ported without me. That wasn't like him. It took a lot to get him upset, and he was always good about responding with a smart remark.

"I don't like how he looks," Dirk said again. "There's somethingoffabout him." I couldn't deny his assessment about Payne, so I didn't say anything at all.

Since I could only fade one person at a time, I used a portal chip to bring the three gremlins along. When we arrived, Payne was tearing into an ogre. I froze as I watched his hand go through the monster's chest. Ogres had extremely tough flesh. For as long as I'd known Payne, I'd never seen him do that. While Payne was faster

and stronger than a human, the maneuver should have broken his hand. Over the decades, I'd watched him get injured enough to know that something wasn't right. The realization made me shudder.

"Is he always so sweaty?" Wallis asked.

"Payne..."

"Reaper!" another ogre yelled. Before I could help, Payne turned. The ogre cried and swung his gigantic fist. Eyes darkening, Payne gave an eerie smile and raised his arm, then punched straight through the ogre's chest.

Blood shot from the ogre's mouth as Payne's arm twisted. Bones cracked and popped as fluids gushed around his wrist.

I wasn't squeamish. After all, Barron and August were showy with their kills too. But Payne's actions made my limbs shake. Given his personality, it seemed so unnatural.

I stepped forward. "You're not using your weapons," I said. Actually, I wanted to ask when did he gain the ability to punch through bones and ogre flesh. I was immortal and couldn't do that. Kitty, Barron, and August, on the other hand, could crush skulls and bones easily. But Payne was something different. He suffered mortal wounds but had never behaved like an immortal. Did his ability have anything to do with the steam billowing from his nose?

Payne cocked his head before yanking his fist from the gaping hole. The massive demon dropped to the ground with a thud. Payne's eyes bulged when he glanced at his hand, and then he frantically wiped the gore on his cloak.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

He didn't respond. He kept desperately rubbing his hand.

"Payne?"

He twitched and glanced at me briefly. "It was nothing."

"Nothing? I can't punch my hand through someone's chest without hurting myself."

## Page 65

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

Payne sighed. "You're overreacting."

"What are you hiding?"

His shoulders stiffened. "Nothing."

"You don't look well. You're sweating like a swamp beast. And you're tense."

"Because it's fucking hot." He wiped his face with his shirt.

I was wearing a long-sleeved fitted shirt. The air was cool and damp in that part of the Underworld.

"What is he?" Dirk asked.

"We don't know," I whispered.

"But you're a Reaper. You should know." Marty blinked up at me.

The gremlins were in for a rude awakening. Reapers didn't know everything.

"I can hear you," Payne muttered.

"He's entering something," Dirk stated.

"I'm what?" Payne's forehead wrinkled.

“You’re experiencing some sort of change.” Dirk pointed at Payne before looking at me. “You shouldn’t be around him. Creatures evolving...changing into the next stage of their life are seldom nice to be around.”

“It really pisses me off that you’re a know-it-all,” I grumbled.

I wasn’t even going to argue about it. Something was happening to Payne. I looked at my hands. Something’s happening to all of us. I just didn’t think Payne’s change had anything to do with the approaching end.

“Since you know everything, what kind of demon am I?” Payne and Dirk were locked in a staring contest.

“You’re not a demon, but I don’t know what you are. I’ve never encountered such a scent as yours.”

“Fucking thought so.” Payne tossed his hands up.

“You should probably descend those souls so we can move on,” I said. “It’s going to be a long day.”

---

It was a long day. Payne was getting worse. His most beloved gun and sword were ignored in favor of killing with his bare hands. There was a triumphant gleam on his face I’d never seen on him. It was primal. Payne was the reliable good guy. He had always been patient, but now I didn’t recognize him.

“Why do you keep staring at me?” Payne snarled as he tossed a corpse to the ground. The loud thump and his eerie, darkened eyes disturbed me.

“We need to figure out what’s wrong. You can’t lose your fucking mind right now,” I said. Not when I lost my powers for a moment the day before. More than anything, we needed the Payne we could rely on.

“No need. I know what’s wrong. I just got to stay away long enough. It’ll pass. It always does.”

Why were men always so damn cryptic?

“So you know what’s happening?” When he nodded, I pressed for more. “I thought you weren’t hiding anything?”

“I don’t know exactly,” he said coolly. “Just a feeling. Drop it.”

“I think—”

Payne tossed his hands up for the billionth time today. “I’m taking you to the castle. Someone else can babysit.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

When he started toward me, Wallis jumped in front of me. “Don’t you touch my lady.”

“Don’t,” I warned Payne. “I can get to the castle on my own.”

“Well, fucking go.” He actually scowled and shooed me away.

I hesitated as my stomach knotted with worry. Should he really be left alone? I needed to tell someone Payne had become a loose cannon. I probably should tell someone about what happened to me too. The idea terrified me since admitting weakness wasn’t easy.

“What do you plan on doing?” I asked Payne.

“Work. Something you could do if you’d stop trying to analyze me.”

A death date invaded my mind. It was so abrupt it pulled me away from Payne’s troubles. My heart raced and that upset stomach just got worse. The date belonged to Shepherd’s sister. I had to find him. Rubbing my chest, I glanced down to find Dirk staring at me.

“You paled,” he stated. “What is it?”

“Where’s Shepherd?”

“Relax. He’s likely sensed your distress already.”

Dirk wasn't wrong.

A second later, Shepherd appeared and shoved Payne backward. "What did you do?"

My mate made the mistake of grabbing Payne's shoulder. Shepherd winced and yanked his hand away. "What the fuck? Why are you so hot? Why aren't your clothes on fire?"

"Your soul reaper's here. I'm leaving," Payne muttered and ported away.

When I saw Shepherd's blistered hand, I gasped and held his wrist to inspect it. "Oh, my God! Payne's skin did that?"

My brows raised.

Joy.

Of course. Her skin did the same thing.

But why?

"Did you see his reaction? He wasn't surprised by it either," Shepherd said. Ignoring his injuries, he clasped my hand in his tightly. "What did Payne do? Say the word, and I'll kill him."

A slight smile reached my lips before it waned. The death date, Payne and Joy, and my wonky powers loomed over me like a thundercloud. Suddenly, my body felt numb. "It's not like that. Payne's dealing with something we know nothing about."

"I don't like him near you," Shepherd muttered.

“Then you should have been here with me instead,” I complained.

“Believe me, it physically pains me to be away from you, Princess. I wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t important.”

I watched him closely as he rubbed his fingers gently over my hand. “You’re not telling me something.”

He smirked, then tried to hide it. “I’m a Reaper. That’s what I’ve been doing. Figuring out my powers.”

“You’re a what?” I froze.

“Now, I can help you. I’ll never sleep, never rest, never stop if that means keeping you safe.”

I stared at him for a moment. “You’ve figured out your powers?”

The smirk he tried to keep hidden was on full display. Lifting his hand, a massive scythe appeared in his grip. Around his weapon, my unmistakable pink essence was swirling with his like my siblings and their soulmates. When our eyes met, it almost felt like Shepherd was waiting for me to say something.

## Page 67

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

When I didn't, he murmured, "I carry your essence."

Yes, because you're mine, Soul Reaper.

Shepherd watched me closely.

It was my power and lifeline he was connected to. He was my soulmate, and my pink essence spread rapidly, so much that my head spun. My heart and body ached with the need to tell him. His acceptance of my world brought tears to my eyes.

A bucket of ice fell over me when I remembered the death date. Shepherd beamed at me, so happy and hopeful. Suddenly, I couldn't bear to look at him. It hurt to know I was about to wipe the smile off of his face.

"There's something else. You say you're a Reaper." I closed my eyes and squeezed his hand. "I need you to look at your sister's lifeline."

"What? Why?"

I didn't dare open my eyes until his hand squeezed mine. His smile waned as he paled. "I think I know where you're going with this. Grim might have said something too."

"Sire." Sensing Shepherd's mood, Wallis hugged one of the man's legs.

"How long?" Shepherd asked.

“Eight hours.” His shoulders slumped. “You should go to Tiffany. Spend time with her. She’s going to a place you can never reach her.”

As long as Shepherd was attached to me, he’d be immortal and bound to the human and Underworld. Just like me and my family, he would never know Heaven. I didn’t know what would happen to him if we failed to stop the end, but I didn’t want to lose him, either. Although I hated he was losing his sister, it didn’t change the fact that Shepherd belonged with me.

“I can’t go see her. She thinks I’m dead.”

I dropped his hand. No, no, no. My heart felt like someone jabbed needles through it as his words sunk in. Not once had he revealed himself to Tiffany. How could he hurt himself so much?

“Shepherd, you didn’t do this to yourself,” I said. He wouldn’t look at me. “Did you really keep yourself away from your sister all these years? I understood you couldn’t go to her when you were stuck in your reaping form, but I assumed you would—” Now I hated I didn’t see the truth in his memories.

Raising his head, his eyes searched mine as if he could find an answer within them. “What would I have told her?”

“I’ve seen those memories, Shepherd. I’ve experienced and saw firsthand who your sister is. She would have accepted you! You could have told her anything, and she’d have welcomed you home!” He covered his face, but I pulled his hand away. He needed to hear me. Deep down, he knew I spoke the truth. When I relived his memories, I felt the disgust he had for himself, and my reaction when we first met probably didn’t help that self-loathing of his. But we were two halves of a whole. I wouldn’t let him torment himself any longer.

“She’s right, Sire.” Dirk’s agreement surprised me. “You’ve kept her safe all these years and watched over her. It’s been foolish to hate what you are.”

“It’s too late now,” Shepherd said.

“That is the biggest lie you’ve ever told yourself, Soul Reaper.” Gritting my teeth, I slapped my hand over his heart. His heartbeat was erratic—a mess just like him. I couldn’t imagine how he came to the conclusion that absence was the best option. Was he so terrified of his sister’s response because he’d rejected himself a long, long time ago? “She’s most likely been waiting for you all these years. Without seeing the rest of your memories, I bet you’ve left breadcrumbs for her. You think she didn’t notice someone looking out for her?”

Pulling me close, he kissed my forehead. “Come on. I’ll take you back to the castle.”

“Then you’ll go see your sister?”

My question was met by silence.

Twenty

Prudence

Shepherd faded me home. Yes, faded. He asked me about the space we entered before crossing over to our next destination. We always called it the In-Between—a place out of time—so that was what I told him.

There was a brightness in his eyes as he gazed around the darkened, timeless hole before we arrived at the castle. He walked me to my bedroom, wished me a goodnight, and told me not to worry.

But I did.

The first hour after he left, I thought of him sitting alone wherever he lived, ignoring the clock on his wall. If he had one. Fear clouded my mind and twisted my stomach.

During the second hour, I paced my bedroom because I'd imagined he might be pacing.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

Come on, Shepherd. Your sister only has eight human hours left.

I didn't make it to the third hour. I couldn't waste another second. Shepherd would waste them all telling himself he was doing his sister a favor. When the real reason was plain as day. He feared she'd hate him.

Picturing Shepherd in my mind, my Reaper senses gave me his whereabouts. Fading there, I paused at what I saw. There was no porch to the moldy trailer he lived in. Bricks, like steps, were stacked near the door.

"You're finally here." Dirk's words made me glance up. The gremlin peeked through the cracked door.

"You guys live here?" I asked. It was dark through the windows.

"We lived nowhere before this," Dirk stated.

I frowned. Did he mean the gremlins, or was Shepherd included in that?

"Where's Shepherd?" I walked up the bricks.

Dirk opened the door wider to let me in. "Waiting on you to knock some sense into him."

I stopped abruptly and looked around. My heart sank. There was nothing there. No table in the kitchen. No fridge. Feeling along the wall, I found the light switch.

When I kept toggling it up and down, Dirk said, “No electricity.”

“Why couldn’t you have just visited my dreams?” Shepherd called out.

Glancing into the living room, I saw him on the couch with his eyes closed, arms and legs splayed. He looked miserable. A knot formed in my throat. I caught bits and pieces of Shepherd’s sadness since meeting him, but as I walked through the trailer, tears filled my eyes.

He’d been existing, not living. It was as if Shepherd wanted to feel dead, like he really died all those years ago.

There was very little of anything in the trailer. I dared walk into the bedroom. The only thing inside was a mattress on the floor. The air in the small space was damp and moldy too. Shepherd’s home was falling apart.

Shepherd started to rise from the couch. “Let’s go.”

Hurrying, I pushed him back down, and he looked up at me warily. “Shepherd.”

I didn’t mask my pain. I wanted him to hear, to feel it like he said he could. Tears slid down my cheeks. My soulmate had mistreated himself for years.

“I didn’t want you to see this place, Princess. You’re too precious to step foot in here.”

“You are too,” I whispered. “Do you want to leave this world?” Do you wish to die?

Wrapping his arms around my waist, my soulmate placed his head against my stomach. “What? Fuck no! You can’t get rid of me that easily. I’m not going anywhere. You’re not either.”

“You treat yourself so poorly.” I tried to push him away, but he held me tighter.

“I’ll do better.” His breath heated my shirt, teasing my stomach. “I forgot that I was alive, Princess, and it took finding you to wake me up. You brought color back into my life. Now I see my mistakes.”

I ran my fingers through his hair.

“I regret it,” Shepherd croaked. “Not being a part of Tiffany’s life when I finally changed into my human form again, but I was too afraid by then. After all the lives I’d stolen... I let her believe she could depend on me, then I failed her.”

“You took care of her,” I said. “No, I didn’t see that from your memories. I just know that with certainty.”

“I’m an awful big brother.”

“The worst,” I agreed. “But there’s still time for one last hello and goodbye.”

---

In his reaping form, Shepherd rippled back and forth in the hallway as we waited. I slipped through the door and watched Tiffany sleep. Her husband passed away three years ago, so she was alone. Shepherd, however, refused to enter her room until after she died.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

A massive heart attack would take her from this world. As I stared at her wrinkled face, sadness overwhelmed me. Being there felt too personal. Backing away, I headed toward the door. I'd been through too many of Shepherd's memories. I didn't want to watch her die. This woman knew nothing about me, but I knew a good deal about her.

His purple eyes brightened as I slipped into the hallway. His form was pulsing erratically, letting me know how much he hated the situation.

There were no words for that moment. Silently, I reached out, and he created a hand for me within his shadows. His grip was strong.

We waited ten long, silent minutes outside before I sensed her lifeline ending abruptly. Death claimed her. The urge to set her soul free from that world grew. That was a part of a Reaper's life. Dying was expected for everyone but for us. I'd grown so used to my family's immortality that I didn't know how to say goodbye to loved ones. Through Shepherd, I finally felt what it meant to lose someone. It was like a knife in the chest. The pain shortened my breath and left me with a sadness I couldn't shake.

My stomach quivered with anguish, and I squeezed his ghostly hand. "Go on," I urged.

Without a word, he slipped through the door.

Leaning against the wall, I covered my face and exhaled.

Death. It might claim my family after all. Bile rose in my throat as I remembered what

the bird woman had said to me.

I smell mortal.

Twenty-One

Shepherd

Ghost Tiffany stepped away from her body. Trepidation held me as I waited. I wasn't sure how, or when I should break the silence. Unfortunately, I didn't get to choose when she saw me.

Gasping, she clutched her chest.

"It's okay, Tiffany," I blurted. "It's me." Her eyes grew large as they took in my shadows, so I quickly shifted into my human form.

"Shepherd?"

"It's me." I wanted to smile, to assure her, but I was afraid. Frozen in place, I gave her all the time she needed.

"You've grown a lot. Changed so much." She stepped closer and then paused. "And you don't look a day over thirty!" She tried touching her face, but her fingers slipped through. She huffed before saying, "You're the firstborn, but I'm the one who looks older!"

Her words broke me. It was such a typical reaction from her—getting angry with me for looking younger without asking why.

With everything she could have said after sixty years, she acted exactly like the little

sister I knew. My body relaxed.

“You’re not going to ask why I look the way I do?”

“Shepherd...” She dropped her hands and fidgeted with the hem of her white gown. “I’ve waited for an explanation all these years. I can hold off another minute for you to tell me.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I delayed until I had one last chance.”

“Yes, well, at least I’ll get my goodbye this time.” She beamed so brightly, her wrinkles becoming more pronounced. “I’ve been waiting.”

My voice cracked as I told Tiffany my story, leaving out the ugly parts about killing people and what I ate to survive. Something told me my sister knew the pieces of the story I didn’t tell her about our father and all the other fools I ate because of her. When I said that I was the one who put money into her checking account all those years, she laughed and said she knew. She smiled so much as I spoke. I knew it was all for me because they would be the final ones I’d ever hear from her.

“Look after my family, will you?” she asked, but then batted the air with her hand. “I don’t even know why I asked.” She tried grasping my hands and sighed when she couldn’t. “Man, being a ghost sucks, but not having all those aches and pains is rather nice.”

I shook my head.

“Be well, brother. Be kind.” Her gaze drifted behind me. “I think someone is here to take me to be with my husband.”

Prudence slipped through the door and placed her hand on my shoulder. I caught

Tiffany tilting her head at us. “You two know each other? Shepherd, you know the Grim Reaper?”

“I’m not the Grim Reaper,” Prudence said.

“You’re not?” Tiffany’s forehead crinkled as she shrugged. “The word Reaper entered my head, and that’s what it made me think of.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“I’m a Reaper.” Prudence chuckled softly. “Grim is my father.”

“So you’re the good version of a soul reaper?” Tiffany’s bizarre questions made me rub my brow.

“That’s an interesting way to put it,” Prudence said.

Tiffany wouldn’t get any other answer because I refused to give her all the ugly details about what I was.

“She’s your girlfriend?” Tiffany guessed. “She’s stunning. Even her aura is otherworldly.” My sister grimaced. “This lovely woman is way out of your league.”

I grunted. “She’s my soulmate.” Taking Prudence’s hand, I placed it against my chest. “My soul aches when I’m not with her.”

“Oh, brother,” Tiffany muttered. Sadly, she could never understand. Especially if I told her I dropped flower petals whenever I stayed away from Prudence too long. But I was trying to woo my mate by declaring her as mine, and Tiffany no doubt sensed that.

Prudence’s presence brought me back to life. With that final goodbye to Tiffany, it would also mark my farewell to the human world. I didn’t belong there.

“I’ll always look after your family, but it’s no longer my home.” Prudence squeezed my shoulder as I spoke to Tiffany. “Neither of us belongs here anymore.”

“A home isn’t always a place.” Tiffany looked between Prudence and me. “Sometimes it’s a person to come back to.”

I turned to Prudence, her cheeks rosy and bright white teeth showing. She didn’t hide the pleasure she felt from Tiffany’s words until she saw me looking. Tiffany laughed at Prudence’s stiffened posture. It wasn’t like she could hide her emotions from me. I felt how much she hurt for me, and I knew how happy the moment made her.

“Go ahead, Reaper,” Tiffany said to Prudence. “I’m ready to go home.”

There was a content, bright glow to Tiffany’s ghostly face as she left that world. My shoulders sagged, but at least I got to say goodbye.

It was time to move on. I needed to help my Reaper. I wasn’t foolish enough to think I could save the world, but I could aid the ones that could.

I didn’t know how long we remained in my sister’s bedroom, but the silence ended when Prudence grabbed me by the waist and pulled me to her.

“What are you doing?”

She squeezed me tightly and laid her head against my chest.

My body burst to life every time she touched me. All the words I wanted to say to her lodged in my throat. Instead, I ran my fingers down her back.

“When we fall apart, one of us has to be the glue that holds us together.” Her shaky breath tingled my skin through the shirt.

“I don’t deserve you,” I uttered as I embraced her. “But I’m far from falling apart. Thank you. Because of you, I got to say goodbye.”

“Do you want me to stop?” She jiggled her arms around me.

“Never.”

“Let’s go pick up the gremlins,” Prudence said, stepping back. “I’m taking you home.”

I stiffened, ice filling my veins when I remembered she saw my ugly side. “Prudence...”

“Don’t, Shepherd,” she said sternly. “You’re mine. And whatever belongs to me doesn’t treat themselves the way you have.”

I caressed her cheek. “You’re my home, Princess. For you, I’ll live like a royal.”

“Oh, Soul Reaper...” She sighed as she leaned into me. “You’re like no one I’ve ever met, and I adore you.”

---

As I dropped my bag of clothes in Prudence’s living room, Wallis darted for her huge sectional. “So soft,” he said, rubbing his face into the cushions. He forgot about his favorite humping toy in favor of feeling up the couch. I hoped he didn’t get any bad ideas.

“It smells like cupcakes and Prudence here,” Marty stated before laughing. “I love it!”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Where is my lady?” Wallis asked.

“Right here.” Prudence, walking down her spiral steps, wore a silk black top and shorts that revealed fucking too much in front of those damned gremlins. I nearly swallowed my tongue as she approached. My pulse thrummed wildly as desire coiled in my stomach. It had been two days since our movie date. I wanted my hands on her. Fuck her curse. I would keep her sin so fed it never came out again.

Wallis covered his eyes. “You’re too beautiful, my lady.”

“You better not be thinking what I believe you are.” Prudence wiggled her finger at him. “Which reminds me,” she bent down to retrieve something, revealing her ass.

I grunted, mouth tightening as I glared at the gremlins while her back was turned. Don’t disrespect her or dishonor me by looking, my eyes conveyed. They avoided looking at her until she spoke again.

“Here, Wallis.” Smirking, she walked over and gave him a girl plush doll that was bigger than him. “For you. She’s the only thing you’re allowed to have a go at here. I better not see it, though. She stays in your room.”

Wallis gasped, on the verge of tears. “My lady got me a lady and a room?”

Prudence sighed. “I will never get used to my lady.”

Dirk’s yellow teeth were on full display until Prudence looked over at him. His smile waned, and then he huffed. “You shouldn’t spoil Wallis,” Dirk said.

“You have a room too,” she said. “And so does Marty.”

He bounced up and down. “Can I see my room?”

“You have to pick one first,” she answered.

“We only need one room,” Dirk said in his usual grumpy way.

“Why?” Wallis whined.

Dirk replied, “There will come a day when Sire might want kids. We must think of the rooms as already occupied.”

Kids.

I never gave them a thought because of my situation. I’d always been careful and terrified of getting someone pregnant and creating another soul reaper. But Prudence, with a rounded stomach, carrying our child, sounded far too tempting. Blood rushed to my cock. Already, I’d thrown caution out the door with Prudence. How many times had we shoved my semen inside her? Could she be pregnant already? The thought was so exhilarating my head spun. Suddenly, I had visions of spreading Prudence’s legs wide and thrusting inside her.

“Oh.” Marty nodded. “That’s true.”

Prudence, her face and neck flushing, met my gaze. She was so adorable when embarrassed. I closed the distance between us. When I massaged the nape of her neck, her mouth parted.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she whispered.

“Let’s talk in private.” Taking her by the hand, she let me lead the way to her bedroom. Once inside, I shut the door and locked it. The click of the knob had her arousal seeping out, cloaking the room in her perfection. Turning, I leaned down and pressed my nose into her neck. Goose bumps broke out over her flesh as I inhaled her candy rum scent. “There it is. I’ve been wanting to have my way with you.”

“Speak first.” She moaned as I flicked my tongue over her collarbone. “You said you wanted to talk.”

“Is there a chance we can have kids together?”

“Why couldn’t we?” she asked and pushed at my chest, but I didn’t budge.

“Because I’m a soul reaper, and you’re an immortal?” I suggested.

“So? You’re a man, and I’m a woman. But if you’re worried, my power blocks ovulation.”

“Blocks?” I frowned.

“I can control it with my power,” she explained.

“I’m not worried.”

Actually...

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“We can’t bring a baby into this current mess.” She pushed again, and I gave her a little space. “It’s scary enough that I found you when the end is coming. I won’t risk a precious life.”

Pain shot through my chest. She was right. I was already terrified for her sake. My brain thought of her carrying my child and for a second, I forgot everything at stake. “With you, sometimes I forget all the bad things you’re facing.”

“Because it’s been quiet,” Prudence murmured, biting her bottom lip. “Too quiet. Harvest is planning something.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to help you,” I promised.

She gripped my sides. “I know.”

“But Prudence,” I waited a few seconds before adding, “The fact that I can have children with you makes me really, really fucking glad.” Her cheeks reddened as I ran my palms over them. “Because of you, I know I’m worthy of such things. My kids wouldn’t be monsters because of what I am.”

Prudence tiptoed and whispered in my ear. “Then it’s a date. After we end Harvest and the Devil, we start our future.”

My cock was so hard it hurt. I scooped her into my arms. More of her candy rum scent filled my nostril, intoxicating me farther. “We should practice for the future.”

“I want you, all of you, including your reaping form.”

I froze, skin shimmering. My soul threatened to burst from my skin. “Prudence?” She knew how badly my shadows wanted to touch her.

“I want to explore that part of you. It’s quite intoxicating when I think about it. That you can touch me in a way no one else can.”

Twenty-Two

Prudence

One second Shepherd’s eyes were brightly colored emeralds, and in the next, they glowed purple. The green reflected the humanity he clung to while the other represented the monster he thought he’d become. I was glad he came to terms with himself.

I was ready for Shepherd to unleash his desires and explore me in ways someone shouldn’t be able to. I’d despised soul reapers for so long, not knowing I’d meet such a beautiful demon.

“You’re sure?” His voice dropped an octave, and his body began shifting. Shepherd faded away in some places and revealed his fluid black soul.

“If I said no, would you be good and stop shifting?”

He snatched my wrist, and I gasped.

“No. You’re curious, Princess. I am too. You’ll never get away with lying to me. I know your emotions.”

I shuddered.

Shepherd lifted me off my feet and carried me to the bed. He hovered over me, caressing my jaw as he gazed down. He traced my face with his eyes, studying every inch.

Squirming under his scrutiny, I grabbed his palm and pulled his hand to my mouth to kiss. “What is it?” I whispered.

With a drawn-out sigh, he murmured. “You’re precious. This entire moment is precious to me. I want to box up every second I get with you and tuck it away for safekeeping. And then during those brutal, empty hours when we’re apart, I can replay you like a film inside my mind.”

“Why do we have to be apart?” I frowned.

“Because I’m going to do all that I can to help you and your family. To help the human world.”

“Or you can be selfish with me now.” I pulled his head down to mine and kissed him.

He gave me a sweet groan before pulling away. “No, Princess. I want to be selfish with you forever. Even if that means being away from you more than I’d like each day.”

I pouted as he moved off of me, pulling me up. “Shepherd,” I practically whined as I climbed on his lap. He let me, and my chest swelled with happiness when those giant arms wrapped around my center.

“Grim, your brothers—even Payne—hardly take breaks, right?”

I sighed. No, my brothers especially worked themselves close to death. Two of them had someone to lose. I did, too. I understood what Shepherd meant.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“Can we work together?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I grinned. “Then, it’s settled. Now kiss me.” Waving my hand, I dematerialized Shepherd’s clothes. Well, I tried to. Nothing happened. I froze with my heart pounding.

Shepherd sensed my emotions through the bond and squeezed my hand gently.

“Did it happen again?” he asked.

Not answering, I tried to dematerialize his shirt. It happened instantly, and Shepherd quirked a brow. I glanced at my palm. For a moment, I’d sensed nothing. Again. Empty. Bile rose in my throat.

“Prudence, what is it?” Shepherd grabbed my chin, and the need to cry tickled my nose and eyes. Truly, I was a different person in front of my soulmate. Never once had I been a blank slate in front of him. It was nice to want to confide in someone.

“My powers...” I stared at my hands. “It happened again.”

“I think it’s time to tell your father.” Shepherd wiped away my tears.

“You’re right. For everyone’s sake, I hope it’s just me.”

Suddenly, he kissed me. It was like tasting bliss and breathing in life. That simple

touch made everything feel okay, even if it wasn't. Because I had my soulmate.

When he broke off the kiss, I blinked rapidly.

"Want me to do it again?" he asked.

I nodded, so he kissed me softly, sneaking in his tongue. My stomach got all fuzzy, and my racing heart slowed.

"I can kiss you all night. Just say the word."

"You can do whatever you want to me," I murmured between kisses as I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Just don't stop."

"I'm going to hold you until you fall asleep and nothing more. I think that's exactly what the princess needs tonight. First thing in the morning we're going to see Grim."

My soul reaper was right. Dad needed to know. In Shepherd's arms, he took the worry away until the haunting images woke me...

One moment I was sleeping in his arms, and in the next, I bolted upright in bed. Sweat dampened my skin and my eyes bulged, but I didn't see my room.

Blazing flames, reaching to the moon, filled the scene. The smoke obscured the night sky. A monster with huge horns and black, soulless eyes stood in front of me. My heart hammered inside my chest as I gazed at the towering creature. He stood in a ginormous pit with fire erupting from it. There was no way of knowing how large the abomination was.

Right before the images faded, I heard screams. Then, the horrendous scene vanished, and I was left trembling.

Shepherd's furrowed brows and flat lips greeted me as he shook my shoulders. "You scared me! You've been repeating the word no. I tried talking to you, but you weren't responding." He scratched his jaw. "Prudence, your eyes were completely black the entire time."

Tears slid down my cheeks as I glanced down at my hands. Not answering him, I tried fading. "Nothing.Nothing!"

"Relax," Shepherd barked, rubbing his fingers over my knee. "What do you need me to do?"

"Fade. I need you to try fading. The human world is in danger!"

He nodded grimly, paused a second, and then scowled. "I can't." My heart sank. Of course he couldn't. Shepherd's powers were mine. If I had none, he wouldn't be able to access them either. "Why can't I?"

"Because it's my powers you've been given," I said. "And mine are gone. Shepherd, I think I'm mortal."

Then, my Reaper senses kicked in again. Two more images of the same monster flew through my mind. Three simultaneous attacks at different locations. I materialized clothes on Shepherd and me.

His shoulders sagged. "Your powers are back."

Too bad he didn't understand what all of it meant. Waning powers weren't good for any of us. "We need to go to the human world."

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

I splayed my fingers across Shepherd’s chest. “Don’t ask. Just listen.”

My soulmate placed his hand over mine, holding us together gently as his mouth pressed into a straight line. He wanted to understand and know what I knew. God, he was so perfect. Tears wanted to spill again. Not for the human’s sake, but for mine and his.

Shepherd was patient, so giving and accepting. I needed to be honest to him about what he was to me. He had to know I cared for him, not simply because fate put us together. With everything happening, I couldn’t hold it off anymore.

“I have something to tell you.”

He tightened his grip. In a deep and steady voice, Shepherd asked, “What’s that, Princess?”

I noticed how his figure was split between darkness and light. The soul reaper in him probably craved and demanded more from me, but Shepherd kept with my pace. I truly wanted to discover Shepherd in every way he wanted to love me.

Please let me get that chance.

We couldn’t be at the end. Not yet. I refused to believe it. There were rules. But the entity that set everything in motion never played by them. Harvest was probably responsible for the monsters. The Devil couldn’t unleash his demons until he walked

through the realms.Or could he?

“After,” I promised. “But first, seek your answer within yourself. Look for the places that are disrupted in the human world.”

“How?”

“Like I said, listen. Close your eyes.”

Shepherd did as I asked, and I waited. His eyelids fluttered rapidly. I held my breath, knowing his mind showed him the horrid beings that woke me. He stumbled back before gawking at me.

“What are they?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen such creatures before.”

“They’ve risen out of the ground because of the end coming?”

“What if it’s already here?” I whispered.

He pulled me toward him. “Stop. My little immortal loses her power for several seconds, and it’s already the end? I don’t think so. Nothing is over, Prudence, until it is over. I’m not losing you.Ever.”

Love expanded my chest and lit up my soul. Shepherd had the ability to lift me up and glue me back together at the same time.

I took his hand. “Let’s go.”

“Not without us.” Dirk interrupted. The three gremlins stood together at the doorway.

“We sensed your distress, my lady. With what is happening in the human world, we cannot let you both go alone.”

Twenty-Three

Prudence

Oh, Hades... What was it?

As soon as we arrived, I looked toward the beastly creature. Jaws slackened; my hand went to my chest as I held my breath and listened to the screams. So many. So loud. Bile rose in my throat. I'd never seen something so grotesque. If the diseases and unnatural weather patterns weren't enough on the human realm, that creature would haunt them even after death. Like my vision, only half of its body was above ground. On top of its head were two blazing horns. Instead of eyes, he had empty black sockets and a missing nose. When the abominations shrieked, I saw his gigantic mouth had no teeth either, but oh, did he have flames bellowing out. Even his body was one giant inferno.

When I stepped forward, August's hand shot out.

“Don't get too close,” August ordered, his arm blocking me from stepping forward with Shepherd. It had been a while since I'd seen August. He hadn't been coming to the castle and, in that moment, he didn't look like my greedy brother. He had an unkempt beard and blood covered his torn white shirt. It was so unlike August, a Reaper who believed in always putting his best foot forward.

My eyes bulged. “What happened?”

“It's healed,” my brother sighed, lifting his shirt. “Why do you look so scared, Prudence?” When I stayed silent, his jaw tightened. “It's been happening to you,

too?”

I knew he referred to our powers disappearing. “Yes.” I croaked.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

He nodded solemnly.

My heart ached. “It’s why I’m late. August, I feel nothing in myself when it happens.”

“Incomplete is how I describe it,” he added, ruffling my hair. I swatted his hand away. Was he trying to lighten the mood? “I’m glad you weren’t here when you lost them. Even a few seconds without them could be fatal.”

Covering my lips, I coughed through the billowing smoke. It was hard to see, even with my heightened senses. But the circular fortress put even Dad’s castle to shame. The brick palace had two towers—one on its right side, one on the left, with the creature right at its center. Something about the citadel seemed familiar....

As people, shouting and screaming, poured from the structure, I realized we stood in front of the Louvre. Flames quickly took over the historic monument. My gut twisted as the panic ensued.

Oh, Hades.

The giant shouted and swung his arm, hitting the right side of the museum. The brick buckled and began collapsing. The ground shook, and I swayed.

August glowered at the monster. “You can’t tell from this distance, but on the other side of the flames, his flesh is stitched together. Someone made this creature.”

“Harvest.” I tightened my fists. “Didn’t Isabella tell us he liked to create things?”

“Looks like he’s succeeded.” August materialized his scythe and hung it over his shoulder.

“How do we stop the beast?” I asked.

Looking away from us, August asked, “By the way, why are you with a soul reaper and three gremlins?”

“The name’s Shepherd,” my soulmate said.

August grunted.

“I don’t like this guy,” Dirk grumbled, and I rolled my eyes. Dirk didn’t like anyone.

August’s gaze swept over Shepherd as if he was sizing him up.

I got chills when August’s brows furrowed when he looked at my soulmate.

“Think you can eat that thing?” August said to Shepherd, gesturing at the monster.

“It doesn’t have a soul,” Shepherd murmured. “It has millions. Besides, I’ve never walked through flames to know if I can do it in my reaping form.” He inched forward, then smirked. “It’s a good day to find out.”

The monster roared, and fire burst from its mouth. The blast headed in our direction.

“Watch out!” August yelled and then jumped.

I glanced down at the gremlins. No way could I fade them all in time. Waving my hand, I used my power and pushed them to the side. I looked to Shepherd, getting ready to fade us when he shifted into his reaping form and slipped through me. No,

not through me exactly. I felt him caging me in, like a lover's caress. At first, all I could see was his black soul. Scorching red flames engulfed us. Oh, God. We were inside the monster's assault. With our position, I should have been on fire, but I wasn't.

"Shepherd!" I screamed.

"I feel you," he replied in his husky voice. "Relax."

As the flames died down, I gawked at Shepherd's soul surrounding me. I reached out, trying to touch it, but his shadowy mass moved as I did. I couldn't slip through him. "You're acting like a shield."

"About time my DNA came in handy for something," he deadpanned.

"Shepherd..."

"Cool trick." August appeared beside us again. Morphing his scythe into a sword, he asked, "Mind doing that to me?"

"It's incredibly intimate," I squeaked. "You can't do that."

August sighed. "It's only intimate because you're lovers. I need to get close to that thing."

## Page 76

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

“He’s right,” Shepherd’s form rippled. All the heat I couldn’t feel before burst across my skin as he left me. The air was still scorching even after the monster stopped vomiting fire. “It’s not the same.”

Joy faded in. “Sorry, I got here as quick as I could.”

Derrick held her up by the waist. He pushed her hair out of her face and watched her. I narrowed my eyes as I began to understand why I disliked him. Despite the stick up Payne’s ass, I would always root for him and my sister. So Derrick needed to—

“Joy!” My stomach churned when I saw the blood on her pants.

“What happened?” August demanded and grabbed Derrick by the shirt collar. “And who the fuck is this?”

“I’m her bodyguard.” Derrick said, trying to pry August’s hand from his shirt. “August, right? I’ve heard so much about you.” Derrick’s voice dropped an octave. Even the way his eyes slanted at August was unusual, like he despised my brother.

“I’m fine, August,” Joy muttered.

Pushing Derrick away, August glanced at Joy. “You good?”

Joy tensed. “I’m fine. I’m already healed.” She lowered her head. “But we need to talk.”

“We already know.” Her head lifted quickly. I grabbed her hand, and she squeezed it

tightly.

“You too?” she whispered, and I nodded.

“Luckily, I was there, or your sister would be dead right now,” Derrick butted in. “We were in a bird demon’s nest when her power disappeared again.”

Not acknowledging Derrick’s boasting, August whipped his head in the other direction. “What the fuck! Payne!” August snarled.

I did a double take. Mortal twenty-four-seven Payne walked up to a flaming monster that even we knew not to approach.

“Payne!” Joy screamed and began running toward him. “Payne!”

He ignored her. Or maybe he couldn’t hear her.

“Joy!” August shouted, then gritted his teeth when she didn’t listen. Looking at Shepherd, he yelled, “Soul Reaper!”

But Shepherd had slipped over my brother, shielding his body within his reaping form.

“What the fuck is Payne thinking?” August muttered before fading with Shepherd.

It was too late. Payne disappeared inside the flames raging around the creature.

“August can lose his flesh and become a skeletal monster. Why did he need the soul reaper to shield him from the flames?” Derrick asked as his brows furrowed. Then his lips curved up. “It’s not just Joy, is it? You’re all losing your powers here and there. That’s why he needed the soul reaper. To protect him in case his powers went away

while he was inside the flames.”

I glowered, disliking Derrick even more for pointing out the reality. And the way he clenched his fists watching August made my skin crawl. Still, he kept Joy safe when her powers vanished. Dad wouldn't have requested Derrick's help if the proxy couldn't be fully trusted.

“Thanks for keeping Joy safe earlier. It could have been bad for her if you weren't there.”

“It's what Grim brought me here to do,” said Derrick. “Did you notice?”

“Notice what?”

“Payne. He never screamed. A normal demon would have died screaming and burning. What is he?”

That was the million dollar question. But why did it seem like Derrick stood backanalyzingus. Was I overthinking?

Instead of blazing up in the air and spreading out, the flames on the creature suddenly withdrew. The orange and red embers swirled and formed a funnel. It shrank until there was only the monster and Payne.

“Did Payne...” I drifted off as I gawked at him. He glowed red, lines of orange raced across his skin.

“He absorbed the flames,” Derrick finished for me.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:46 am*

The beast had no protection, which allowed me to study the poorly stitched patchwork on his body. Heads, limbs, and other demon parts held him together.

With a battle cry, August, no longer shielded by Shepherd, launched into the sky toward the creature. One giant arm swooshed through the air. August faded before it hit him. Shepherd jumped in from the left and cut into the creature's limb. The monster wailed and went to swing his other hand. Payne jumped into his palm. What? I gasped as the fingers closed with him inside.

"Payne!" Joy screamed, and Derrick rushed toward her.

Materializing my scythe, I transformed it into a bow and created a pink arrow. I pulled the string back, looking for a spot of weakness. A bright glow of orange burning over the creature's hand caught my attention. Steam rose. A second later, it exploded, and Payne burst out with a roar.

August reappeared above the giant; blade raised. My brother swung forward, straight down the beast's chest. Body parts fell from the gaping wound. The ground shook, buckling my knees, as the abomination howled. I focused on the opening and let go of the arrow. It whizzed through the air, whistling as my pink essence expanded. The tip touched the monster's flesh and then detonated. Yes! There was a thunderous boom then pink sparkles of my power lit up the night sky. Body parts fell around me. An arm landed on me, and I gagged. So many limbs belonging to wolves, the legs and torsos of rat demons, ogre heads littered the ground. The stench of smoke and burning flesh watered my eyes.

Shepherd greeted me in his reaping form the second I reappeared. He shifted into his

human form and pressed me against his chest.

“One down,” he told me.

“Two to go,” August finished Shepherd’s words. Turning to Payne with a scowl on his face, August said, “Mind telling me what the fuck you were thinking? None of us could have gotten to your ass in time to save you. And you’re glowing like a human flame.” When Payne didn’t say a word, August gritted his teeth. “You’re not even listening.”

Payne stalked away. I looked toward what held his focus. Joy. Derrick pulled her closer as he walked like he was trying to lead her somewhere and she shoved him away. What was Derrick doing? When Joy turned toward us, Derrick caught her jaw, preventing her from seeing Payne coming.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” August faded in front of Payne, blocking his path. “You’re going to do whatever you just did two more times. Grim is with Barron and Sebastian now, dealing with the same monster.”

“Move,” Payne told him.

“Soul Reaper, you’re coming too, in case Payne can’t do his little trick again,” August muttered. “Prudence—”

“Don’t order me around,” I cut him off. “I’ll stay here and tend to the humans and souls that need guiding. All of you stay safe.”

August froze and stared at me. “Is Prude showing she has a heart bigger than most of us? Fuck. The world really is ending.”

Shepherd hugged me tighter. “Ask me to stay and I will. Your brother will manage.”

“Go. There’s no danger here anymore.” I patted his back. “Besides, you sense my emotions. You’ll come to me when something’s wrong.”

“Always.” He placed his forehead to mine and closed his eyes.

“Get Joy’s bodyguard to help you guys.” August waved his hand toward Joy. Of course he wouldn’t know Derrick’s name. August couldn’t care less about who he was. “He’s done nothing but watch. Make him work.” With that, August latched onto Payne and faded.

“Can you sense where August is going?” I asked Shepherd.

“Yes.”

“Be safe,” I whispered.

“Don’t worry, Sire, we’ll be here with my lady,” Dirk said, panting heavily. I turned around and smiled at the three breathless gremlins.

“My heroes,” I deadpanned.

“Don’t get in her way,” Shepherd told them, then faded to catch up with August.

Twenty-Four

Prudence

“Why aren’t more Reapers coming to help?” Dirk inquired as I ascended the hundredth soul.

“Because the end approaching has the human world in chaos. Our Reapers are

scattered everywhere, dealing with death. Like this little girl,” my voice quaked. My fingers shook as I gently closed her terror-filled eyes. So young...

She’s going some place better.

Funny how those words were the only ones we could find a degree of comfort. We were losing. We weren’t protecting them enough. So many people were dying before their true death dates.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

Soot covered me from head to toe. My lungs hurt with the amount of smoke I inhaled. If I hadn't materialized a mask, I would have died while tending those souls. I provided masks for the gremlins too. They shouldn't have come. Their devotion to Shepherd was admirable, but I felt like they went too far to prove themselves. They were loyal to the soul reaper without being with him .

"My lady." The urgency in Dirk's tone caught my attention.

Derrick stood next to Joy as she ascended souls. Since he wasn't a Reaper, he couldn't help no matter what August said. The only thing Derrick could do was help if danger came our way again.

"How well do you know him?" Dirk whispered, like he wanted to prevent Derrick from hearing our conversation.

"Not much," I admitted. "Why?"

"Don't be obvious, but pay attention. Every few minutes, he looks at you, and then at your sister."

I frowned. Dirk was overreacting. Dad would never hire someone we couldn't trust, but the uncertainty formed a lump in my throat. I felt the same way. Joy was too unusual as of late to pick up on anything odd about Derrick, too.

"It's like he's waiting for something."

"I don't like Derrick either," I said. "But my dad trusts him." I had to believe in my

father. He'd went out of his way to make sure we were protected.

"My lady," he started again.

I sighed. "All right, I'll watch him."

Twenty-Five

Shepherd

"What are you? A fucking volcano or something?" August yelled when I caught up to them. Then I saw his burnt hand and understood why.

"You grabbed me," Payne said, striding away and heading for a second blazing monster.

"Is that Payne?" Grim asked as he dropped beside us.

"Just wait. There's more," August said.

We watched Payne disappear into the flames of the horned creature. Just like he did with the first.

---

Two dead monsters later, I was more than ready to go to Prudence. Her calm, sad aura penetrated through the bond. I lived and breathed her. Petals fell everywhere I walked, and her brothers took notice.

"So that's a soul reaper thing?" Sebastian asked as he picked up a petal and inspected it. "You're a dying flower?"

“Lift his shirt,” Barron barked, stalking toward me.

I glared. “Come again?”

“Hold still Soul Reaper, there’s something we need to check,” Sebastian said, coming closer.

“There’s nothing to check. Prudence’s essence is embedded throughout his form,” August muttered.

My forehead wrinkled. What were they going on about?

“Such a cute pink Soul Reaper.” Sebastian laughed.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I asked.

“You haven’t noticed the pink lines appearing in your reaping form?” August quirked his brow.

“Pink?” I shifted forms. Just like August said, stripes of pink rippled through the black. Instead of being offended by the pink, my heart soared. Could I really be... No, I wouldn’t get my hopes up. I’d let Prudence tell me. The possibility made my shadowy mass quiver.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

“All right,” Grim interrupted. “We have a lot of work to do.”

“You really need to stop leaving me out of the loop.” I turned as the unfamiliar voice spoke. “How could you kill pieced together monsters without me?”

I frowned, not recognizing the tattooed male, but he smirked at Grim. Was he a friend of his? If so, why did Grim’s forehead crease the second he spotted the newcomer?

“And where’s that ungrateful son of mine?” The man’s gaze bounced around the area.

Sebastian pointed toward the billowing smoke. “He’s right...” Sebastian’s words died, and then he exhaled. “Well, hewasright there guiding souls. You know Payne. All work and no—”

“Fear, where’s Joy?” Grim asked, interrupting his son.

What kind of name was that?

Fear arched a brow and then smiled. “Well, well. Does that mean Payne’s finally got his head out of his ass and started treating my future daughter-in-law better?”

“Not going to happen.” August glowered at Payne’s dad.

“I second that,” Sebastian agreed.

“Ryan,” Grim said urgently. All eyes turned to him. “You’re supposed to be with her.”

“Why would I be with her?” Fear frowned. Or was it Ryan? Grim used both names.

“Because I asked you to stay by her side after the human festival. You agreed.”

Fear frowned. “Grim, you never asked me.”

“Yes, I did, and I’ve seen you with her a few times!”

“Grim, what are you talking about? You got a proxy to stay with Joy,” Sebastian said, his brows knitting together as he watched his father.

“That guy is a proxy?” August’s jaw tightened. “Why would you ask for help from one?”

“Who are you talking about?” Grim demanded. “I brought no one in we didn’t know!”

“But you did,” Sebastian told him.

“No, I didn’t. I spoke to Ryan, and he agreed.” Grim gripped his head and swayed. August and Sebastian caught him, but he pushed them away. “If I didn’t speak to Ryan, then who did I speak to? Who dared trick me?” Grim shouted. “Where’s Joy?”

“Why are you wearing gloves?” August looked at Grim as he grabbed one of his hands. Grim pulled away. “Dad.”

I’d never heard any of his sons call him that. It appeared to surprise Grim too. He gaped then looked away, but his voice was softer when he spoke. “It’s nothing. Let’s just find your sisters. I have a bad feeling.”

I shouldn’t have left Prudence alone. My muscles tensed as I watched Grim. I didn’t

know if it was the urgent way he acted, but something didn't feel right. My stomach churned. The man with us wasn't the one I'd seen Prudence's sister with, and his name most certainly wasn't Fear or Ryan. It was Derrick.

"I'm leaving," I said to no one in particular. They didn't need my help anymore, and each second away from Prudence was agonizing. My bones ached, and my throat tightened.

"Grim. Boys," Fear murmured before materializing a blade and holding it up. "Behind you."

I heard the moaning first. Then there was a whizz in the air, followed by clacking like something was smacking together. Then I glanced behind them, my form rippling as I peered through the smoke.

What. The. Fuck.

The body parts that erupted from the dead monster floated in the air until it connected with other limbs. A head slapped into a torso with one leg. The same happened with two legs and a head—yes, it shouldn't have been possible, a head sitting atop a pair of legs, but... They dropped to the ashy ground and walked forward. The ones with no legs propelled themselves forward if they had an arm. It was like watching magnets slap together. One thing had three legs and a torso. Another was an ogre intact besides his head with tentacles attaching themselves to his back. I'm not seeing this. The flaming beast had been easier for my brain to handle. My mouth dropped as I shook my head. But these whatever-they-were... They clunked together and formed a horde of something right in front of me.

And God, the moaning. The bodies without legs dragged themselves forward, raking up the ashes. It was unnatural.

Petals fell around me when I sensed Prudence's distress. My lungs ceased to work as fear gripped me. I gasped. Prudence's fear. Not mine.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

“Go find your sister—” I didn’t stick around to hear more. If Derrick was evil, he posed a threat not to just Joy. I left Prudence with him.

Twenty-Six

Prudence

My agitation turned to worry when Joy refused a mask after I told her to use one. Derrick cast a black sphere of magic that glowed over his mouth and nose to protect his lungs. Even he knew to shield himself from this smoke in some way. Yet Joy said she was good. Sure, she surprised me by not dying, but Joy was far from all right.

I couldn’t see her face through the ash and grit covering her from head to toe, but what I saw was the way she gasped as she struggled to breathe. “Joy.” I exhaled. “Please put on a mask. You’re going to keel over.” The idea of her dying while our power malfunctioned made my heart pound.

“It’s not the smoke,” she whispered hoarsely. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not,” I disagreed, grabbing her shoulder and forcing her to face me. What the...Through her cloak, she felt feverish. “Joy, listen to me. We’re losing our powers. A second without them is enough to end you permanently.”

She wiped her sooty face and glanced down. “You’re right. I’m sorry—I’m just so...”

“So what?”

“It’s embarrassing,” she admitted, still not making eye contact.

“What is?”

“The fever,” she murmured, and then looked over her shoulder at Derrick. “What it’s doing to me. Something’s coming for me. I don’t know what, but every night I see him in my dreams.”

“Joy, you’re confusing me. Who’s coming for you? Harvest? We won’t let that happen.”

“Not Harvest. This is something else. The man I dream about gave me this fever!”

Something snapped behind me. Joy and I looked at the same time. I materialized my scythe and transformed it into a blade. “I heard something.”

“Me too,” Joy murmured.

“I still hear it.” I concentrated on listening and peering through the smoke. I saw movements. Shadows or something. A chill ran down my spine when I heard the groans. And there was another noise I couldn’t quite place. Like objects slapping together. It wasn’t loud enough to be metal. More like body partssmackingtogether. I crinkled my nose, stepped closer, and heard a slight whistle. I turned and ducked as something whizzed by my head. Then I saw fingers.

“Was that an arm?” I asked.

“Prudence, the body parts,” Joy shouted. “They’re coming together!”

“To making something new.” I lifted my blade. Then a numbness hit me square in the chest, stealing my strength. No, no, no! The bitter emptiness. I froze as my blade

vanished. I glanced down at my hand, heart quickening. The mask I wore evaporated too. Smoke filled my nostrils, and I choked.

“Prudence!” Joy panicked. Her weapon disappeared.

“My lady.” Dirk tugged on my cloak. “What’s wrong?”

“Our powers disappeared.”

“And here I thought it would be difficult to steal one of Grim’s daughters.” Derrick’s chuckle grabbed our attention. He sauntered toward us. “But Grim is fading away and his children are becoming mortals. Harvest is going to love this bit of news.”

Twenty-Seven

Shepherd

I faded, slipping through the out-of-time place. Only I didn’t pass through. Instead of reaching Prudence’s location, I went to the darkened space and floated. There was no light or sound in the void. The blackness had no presence. Just a bleakness that stole all my thoughts and left me with an overwhelming panic.

Prudence... Prudence, I tried to ignore the desolation weighing on my shoulders. I need to get to her!

Trying to leave again, I couldn’t. Suddenly, I understood. Prudence’s powers were acting up. Which meant...

No!

## Page 81

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

I couldn't be stuck there until my powers returned. I had to get to Prudence. Tightening my fists, I ignored the petals falling at my feet and tried fading again but nothing happened.

“No!”

Fear pierced my heart as if someone shoved a blade through it. I rubbed my chest as the ache intensified. Wait! The feeling wasn't mine alone. Bile rose in my throat. Oh, fuck, no! I sensed Prudence's emotions through the bond. “Prudence!” I yelled. No.No, no, no.“Prudence!”

Since I couldn't use powers, I ran through the darkness to find another way out. If I lost her... If someone took her from me, I would killeverything. But no matter how far I ran or screamed, there was no escaping the void.

I shouldn't have left the portal chip. I knew her powers were acting up. As connected as we were, I should have known her struggles were mine to bear as well.

I'm so sorry, Princess.

If I couldn't get to her in time...

Squeezing my eyes shut, I focused on Prudence's emotions. I sensed fear and distress but no pain. She wasn't hurt.Yet.

I gritted my teeth as Prudence's worry increased. I stopped abruptly.

Something inside me said to lift my shirt. Maybe I needed the reminder that Prudence and I were connected beyond something more than the bond by looking at the pink goat.

In every way imaginable, I wanted to be linked to Prudence. Where she walked, I followed. I just wanted to love my Reaper with everything within me. My breath shook as I eased up the material.No....This can't be real.

Her pink goat was missing. All I saw was the dark ink covering my skin.

I blinked, then swallowed heavily. It was that place, right? The emptiness here wanted me to think the worst.

Pain tore into my lungs. It felt like something snuck up and attacked me from behind. I cried out as my vision blurred. I sucked in a breath as I fell to my knees, unable to hold myself up, as the aches encompassed me.

Fuck!

Was my back broke?

I moved slightly to see.No, I'm fine.I just felt like I was dying. I rubbed my neck and began coughing. My throat felt like sandpaper, and I couldn't breathe.

Then I knew.Prudence's pain.

I screamed into the void as my soul burst out, dispersing my human form. My mate was in danger.

"Stay strong, Princess," I croaked. "When I come, something will answer for your pain."

## Twenty-Eight

Prudence

Derrick snarled. "I've been biding my time. Finally, my chance is here."

Suddenly, the bad vibes made sense. Despite his gentle human appearance, the warlock was anything but kind. His devil-may-care smirk and blackened stare screamed wicked.

Joy wiped soot from her face. "What are you talking about?"

I covered my nose to block out some smoke, but within seconds, I was coughing nonstop. Hades! My eyes stung so badly. My lungs and throat hurt like I swallowed barbed wire. I never realized the benefits my powers had until they were stripped away.

As fear knotted inside me, affecting me like the smoke, one thought hit me. Am I going to die here?

"Cover your mouth with something," I yelled at Joy as I ripped off the bottom of my shirt and wrapped it around my nose and mouth.

"Your sister asked a question. Prudence, don't interrupt," Derrick said. He flicked his hand, and I sailed through the air.

"My lady!" Wallis and Marty screamed.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

The air whistled in my ear, and then I collided into a part of the ruined museum. The weakened structure collapsed as I crashed through it. Bricks fell on my legs. The agony made my vision spin, but when I tried to scream it got lodged in my throat. Holy—I sucked in a breath. Or tried to. No. I couldn't. Intense pain ripped through my chest and ribs with each inhalation. I can't do it. My head throbbed with the shallow breaths. The smoke, my broken ribs, the end—nothing was in my favor. Panic swelled inside me, threatening to swallow me belly first.

If I died there, there would be no coming back to life. Tears spilled down my cheeks.

Dirk slapped me and shouted, "Exhale."

Holy fuck! When I did, intense pain sliced up my ribs and back. Something was definitely broken. I gripped my side.

In that moment, I had an idea what made everything so scary. Although I'd experienced death hundreds of times over in my life, I'd never endured it as a mortal. To be human was a terrifying thing. No wonder we were tasked to protect mankind from the Devil and his demons. They only had one life to live. One life to fall in love. No wonder saying goodbye was so hard for them. The thought of leaving this world forever—losing Shepherd forever... I couldn't die here. Just a little longer... All Joy and I had to do was survive Derrick's assault until our powers returned.

Nothing was that easy, though.

With a painful scream, I pushed the fallen bricks off of my legs.

“Prudence!” Joy screamed as she approached.

“Don’t move,” Derrick said, and she stopped.

Get up.

Get up!

Closing my eyes, I placed my palms on the ground and rose. I coughed more, my lungs filling with smoke with every inhale. Everything hurts. But I was a Reaper, my father’s daughter, and Joy needed me. My sweet, gullible sister needed me. So I bit my bottom lip to keep from whimpering.

“My lady.” Dirk’s voice trembled.

“I’m fine,” I exhaled slowly.

“I may be a powerful proxy, but I’m not immortal like you and your family. I have to be careful with my life since I only get one, unlike you,” Derrick said. He was speaking to Joy.

Without my powers, I couldn’t see through the wafting smoke. But I had to move. Blinking my eyes, I stepped forward as the pain zigzagged up my ribs.

Derrick continued, “I had to choose the perfect opportunity to take one of you.”

So he’d been around Joy the entire time, waiting. Gritting my teeth, I staggered forward while holding my side. I didn’t know what I should do, but I had to divert his attention away from Joy.

“Leave her alone!” I yelled.

“Don’t come any closer, Prudence,” Joy shouted. “He doesn’t want you.”

“Joy!” I wiggled my fingers. Why hadn’t our powers returned? They’d never been gone for so long.

“Are you a Harvester?” Joy asked.

I wished I could see them. I wiped my eyes to no avail.

“He has someone that belongs to me, and I need your brother to die so I can have her completely.” What? Why did Derrick want one of our brothers dead? “With your powers fading, I now know it’s possible to kill a Reaper.”

Oh, no. I didn’t like the sound of that. We couldn’t let Derrick tell Harvest about our powers!

“My lady.” Dirk tugged at my pants. “Behind you.”

I heard the moaning first. The hairs on my arms stood on end as I turned. The groans grew louder. Rubbing my eyes didn’t help my blurred vision. Something dragged across the ground, the scrape of rocks and debris intensified. The thuds and gurgle kept increasing like there were hundreds of them moving closer. Bile rose in my throat. Just what the hell was coming? How did Joy remain unaffected?

“You can’t see, but you must hide.” Dirk urged me forward.

I stumbled as I let him pull me forward several steps.

“Those abominations are coming for you.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

“Guide me to Joy,” I said.

“I cannot,” he said.

“He’s going to take my sister!”

“He already has.”

I stopped moving and listened. Popping and crackling filled my ears. “Joy!”

The constant moaning grew louder.

“Joy!”

She never answered. I froze, screaming her name once more because I didn’t believe Dirk. Joy couldn’t be gone—not that quickly. Derrick didn’t take my sister. He didn’t! “Joy!”

The moans answered back.

My erratic heart beat loudly in my ears while my stomach twisted into knots. “No, no, no, no! Please Joy!” I cried, wiping my face.

If I had my powers, I could sense Joy’s essence and locate her. “Derrick!” I shouted, then stumbled as my foot caught on something in front of me. I extended my arms in front of me and inched forward again. Embers wafted toward my face when something fell and ashes scattered. “Ah! Hades!” I smacked at the cinders on me in a

desperate attempt to lessen the sting.

“You must survive if you want to get your sister back,” Dirk said.

Something yanked my shoulder. On instinct, I whirled around and punched. A cold liquid encased my knuckles. What the hell did I strike? Did that creature have no bones? I gagged as an awful stench came from the bubbling wound. Removing my hand, I wiped it against my cloak. Tiny sharp fragments pressed against my fingers. Whatever I hit had bones—broken,rotted ones.

Another creature grabbed my neck, lifting my feet off the ground.Shit!I wheezed and latched onto an arm. With all my might, I punched like hell. Ouch! Pain sliced up my knuckles. That one had a more solid body. The arm tightened and pressure built behind my eyes. Fear built in my chest and boost of adrenaline coursed through my veins because of it. I lifted my arms over my head, blindly swinging. I would scratch and pull hair,anything,if I was able, but all I felt was the air between my fingers.

What the Hades? Where was its head? My mouth dried as I choked.

My heart slowed, my once erratic beats spacing further and further apart, thumping so lightly inside my chest that it ached. Oh, no. Smoke inhalation.

I think...

Was I really about to die?No. I refused.

Grabbing the arm around my neck, I tried to pry away the fingers. Black dots spotted my vision, then everything became a white fog.

“NO!” I screamed, fighting off death.

With everything I had left, one by one, I broke through the grip that held me. Warm embers blew up as I fell on my ass, burying me in that horrid night.

Something took tiny steps across my stomach before grabbing my leg. How could I survive this? I can't. I closed my eyes. I had nothing left.

"They're all around you." Dirk's voice startled me.

I raised my arm until my fingers bumped his nose. Ah, the stupid gremlin sat on my chest. I was too tired to care. Everything hurt. The need to rest, to sleep, overwhelmed me. The sweet emptiness drifting over me was so much nicer.

"My lady!" Wallis screamed.

When I gasped, a sharp pain seized my lungs. The next few seconds were pure agony as if I'd swallowed up the ocean with no means to breathe. My chest felt like it would explode as it intensified.

"Breathe!" Dirk smacked my chest.

I tried harder, but that only made my torment worse.

"I'll keep you safe until Sire gets here."

The yanking at my leg became more insistent. I had no energy to tell that to Dirk. Pressure slammed into my chest. A sickening crack followed it. My pain dulled. This was it. I recognized that sweet relief. The white haze beckoned me, stealing all my aches. I was familiar with that stage of death—only I always came back to life. But I knew I wouldn't.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

Were we selfish? Was I selfish for trying desperately to survive when I had lived for such a long time? My dying brain conjured up a face. Green eyes. Blondish hair. So handsome it was irritating. Shepherd. But more than his beauty, I cherished every broken thing about him, especially his mind and heart. I hadn't known him long, but he helped me see how little time mattered anymore. There was no limit for feelings, but I wanted to explore all those he gave me. I couldn't die. I hadn't told him everything. I hadn't gotten any part of him. I wanted a life or two—or a hundred with him. I never got to hold him or love him—to be one with him.

And Joy. Sweet, innocent Joy. Dying here was nothing compared to what would happen to her if Harvest got a hold of her.

So, I tried to breathe. I kept gasping and gasping, fighting off death until my powers came back. But my attempts seemed futile.

I inhaled. My body took in so much smoke, but it didn't matter until I felt my essence. My power bursting through, making me whole once more. The pain came roaring back. I gasped, eyes shooting open. There was relief, but not from death. The pain lessened. My lungs and throat tingled instead of burned. Gritting my teeth, I screamed as I materialized my blade and swung. Whatever was in front of me made a horrid, gurgling sound and then toppled over.

My vision came back to me with a few rapid blinks. Then I heard someone roaring. My heart stilled as I caught sight of Shepherd hacking into the misshaped creatures. He ripped through the things like a tsunami. Chest heaving and eyes a bright violet, his anger bled through with every swing of his blade.

His vicious battle cry made my skin prickle. Above the billowing smoke and piles of bodies, I saw him and felt his wrath. My soul reaper was filled with anger—my anger—and that made me adore him all the more.

Finally, I looked down. “Dirk!” My throat tightened as I cried out.

The gremlin had a gaping wound in his chest, and his blood covered me. Hades! What happened? Sitting up, I caught his gangly body before he toppled to the ground. Swallowing the heaviness in my throat, I gently closed his eyes.

“Dirk?” I touched his skinny ribs and froze. My lips trembled as I lowered my head to his. “You took that last hit for me, didn’t you, Grumpy?”

The gremlin didn’t reply.

“My lady...” Wallis was hesitant as he approached.

“What’s wrong with Dirk?” Marty asked as he stepped over a corpse.

Ignoring the tears threatening to spill, I rose to my feet and started walking. “Shepherd,” I said, but he didn’t hear me. “Shepherd!” With another roar, the soul reaper hacked into another walking corpse. Bloodlust became him. That made my soul ache, and my vision blurred. “Shepherd,” I whispered, finally letting the tears fall as I held Dirk against my chest.

Lifting my hand, I pulled Shepherd to me. His boots left the ground, and he nearly dropped his sword, but he flew to me. His arms shook for a second, and his grip tightened on his sword.

When Shepherd’s gaze snapped to me, his jaw tightened as I lowered him in front of me.

He studied my face before wiping his thumb across my cheek. The more he rubbed, his eyes watered and flashed between purple and green. "I can't see you beneath all the ash." He palmed my cheek. "You're going to stand there and watch me slash through all these things? Eating these lost souls would never be enough, I'll rip them apart for daring to hurt what's mine."

"Shepherd..." I lifted Dirk.

Shepherd's hand dropped, and his shoulders sagged as he took in the gremlin's lifeless form. "Is he..."

I nodded.

Shepherd took him from me.

"He saved me. Dirk saved me. If he hadn't been there to take the hit..." I let the words die on my tongue as I lowered my head. "I'm sorry."

"We protect our masters," Wallis said, tugging on my cloak.

"Dirk did well. He protected who I love when I couldn't."

My lips trembled at Shepherd's declaration. My heart fluttered despite the pain, and the situation the Reapers were in. It was strange how love found me as the world was ending.

"Don't be sad. You give us life." Marty climbed up my leg and smiled with his ugly yellow teeth. He pointed at Dirk. "If you weren't an immortal and a Reaper, Sire's lifespan would have been shared with you. Same for us. It's why we seek Sire's kind. They give as much as they take. But now, with you a part of Sire's bond, your immortality is shared with us. You protected Dirk."

I understood.

Suddenly, Dirk gasped and jumped up so quickly he almost fell out of Shepherd's arms. "What are you standing here for?" Dirk yelled.

Shepherd patted the gremlin's head. "Of course you're alive. It's not that easy to get rid of you." Dirk smacked away Shepherd's hand and scowled.

The ugly bastard lived! More tears spilled as I took him from Shepherd. I hugged Dirk, and the gremlin tensed at first. "You scared the shit out of me, Grumpy!" He shook slightly before he wrapped his arms around me. His grip was strong for such a tiny thing.

"My lady held on until her powers returned. Her strength—her immortality—keeps me here. My lady is persistent and fierce. She's perfect for Sire."

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

That was the nicest thing Dirk ever said to me, and I had a feeling it would be the only time he ever did.

He pulled away. “What are you waiting around for? We need to save your sister.”

My stomach tensed.

“Take Dirk to get looked at by my mom.” I pushed him into Shepherd’s arms. “I need to find Joy.”

“I’m fine,” Dirk said stubbornly. He hopped down as Shepherd snatched my wrist.

His eyes narrow as his jaw tightened. “I’m not leaving your side anymore, Prudence. I will fight you on this. You can hate me, but never again will I leave.”

Oh, Hades. If I were made from snow, I would have melted at his feet. My heart bounced within my chest.

“Shepherd,” I whispered.

“Your immortality is disappearing randomly. I won’t leave you in danger like that again! Do you know what it was like to be stuck somewhere knowing you were—” His voice cracked, and he covered his face, taking a deep breath. When I pulled his arm down, I saw tears falling down his cheeks. “I felt your pain, Princess, the second you realized you almost died, and I could do nothing. Nothing. When your powers vanished, I was fading and got trapped in that dark void you call the space in-between. Never again will I feel that hopeless again. I’ll be there for you when it

happens next time.”

“Sire...” Wallis voice shook. “The dead things are getting closer.”

Wallis reminded me my sister’s abduction wasn’t the only problem. Dead things staggered around the human world. They weren’t very strong, but together they could kill.

A loud whirring interrupted my thoughts. As the buzzing neared, it deafened the roar from the raging flames. A bright light shone down from above. Shielding my eyes, I looked up at the helicopters.

The human cavalry was there. It was probably for the best.

As if he knew my thoughts, Dirk sighed. “Let the humans deal with the walking corpses. With their weapons, they can manage.”

Dirk was right. The humans had to do it on their own. We could no longer hide our world from them because ours was falling apart as well.

“All right,” I said. “We stick together.”

Because it was no longer if my powers faded again, it was when.

Twenty-Nine

Prudence

Before we faded, the family arrived. August appeared first with his shirt torn open. Blood covered his chest and one side of his face. He looked like he’d been through hell and back. I doubted he’d failed our sister like I did.

I let my shoulders sag as he came to me. He gripped one tightly and lowered his head to mine for a moment before turning away. My chest ached. I didn't know what to think of his gentleness. I knew my brother loved all of us, but he so rarely showed it. Like me. I never realized how much I took my family for granted until Derrick took Joy. It was worse than Kitty's kidnapping ten years ago. At least, we had been able to sense her. With Joy, my power blindly reached out for her and came back empty. It was like she didn't exist.

"The proxy could have taken you both, but he only took Joy?" August asked, brows furrowing. "If she's been with the proxy the entire time, it means Joy was his target from the beginning." August paced back and forth.

"Do you sense Joy?" I asked.

"No," August clipped out. Roaring, he picked up a huge chunk of a burning wall and threw it.

The helicopters shining a light down on us didn't faze him one bit as he continued to throw debris.

"This is where I felt Joy last," Barron said as he arrived with Gwendolyn. He tucked her against his side as he watched. August stopped his rage when he spotted Barron. One brother gritted his teeth while the other breathed heavily. No words were needed. Their sagging shoulders spoke volumes.

Failure.

We lost Joy. We'd been unable to find Harvest, so how would we locate Joy? My throat tightened, and I sucked in a breath. I can't. With shaking fingers, I covered my face and bawled. I let down Joy.

Shepherd planted a soft kiss on my forehead and wrapped his arms around me.

“Prudence,” said Sebastian as he faded in. He wiped my tears. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

“It’s my fault. I couldn’t save her. I was the only one near—”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find her,” August interjected.

“How?” Maureen appeared, glaring as she materialized her twin blades and hacked away at the moaning dead creatures. “If she’s with Harvest already, we won’t find her. Whoever shields him from our senses is really good at it.”

“Maureen,” warned Barron. His red essence steadily flowed around him.

Gwendolyn touched his shoulder. “Barron, your sister needs you to keep it together.”

As we spoke, more helicopters appeared. Water sprayed down and dampened us. Fire trucks echoed in the distance, and a man’s voice spoke over a loudspeaker, “We need everyone to drop your weapons...” He kept on and on, but no one gave a damn. No doubt live footage of us had spread through the various TV networks.

“Let’s split up and start looking. We won’t stop until every spot has been checked,” Sebastian said. “Grim’s searching with Mom and Kitty. We can’t reach Payne. He left us when our powers disappeared, so maybe he’s searching for Joy.”

I hesitated at the mention of Payne before I finally said, “No, I think maybe we should look for Payne, too. He’s been a little strange.”

“Yeah,” Sebastian sighed. “It was kind of hard to miss him walking around like a giant flame.”

“I hate this!” Maureen sucked in a breath and closed her eyes. “I shouldn’t have spoken like that about finding Joy. I’m just...”

Scared. I understood my sister all too well. Because just like that, we lost one of us.

---

We searched the City of the Dead first. Our senses were the sharpest right in the middle of purgatory. The Underworld was where the Devil belonged. As the lines kept blurring, I wondered if maybe the Devil worked with Harvest to bring us down. In the end, there would be us and them. And our side was losing.

It took twenty-four hours to search the city. No scent or sense of our sister Joy. One hour was plenty for one proxy to make his way to Harvest and let him know our powers were failing.

In the twenty-fifth hour, we split up into groups. Dad sent out all his Reapers to the human world and the Underworld to search for Joy.

---

On the third day of our search, as demon activity increased, souls began stockpiling in the human world. Whispers from the City of the Dead spoke of portal chips being distributed to demons. The action created an even bigger ruckus in the human realm. The humans were learning of demons. Their future was in peril. Although mortal, knowledge made them capable of defending themselves.

I wiped my brow as I ran through a cave in the Underworld. Footfalls thumped heavily behind me. He’s right on my ass. No matter how fast or far I ran, Shepherd kept up. A low and pleasant hum stirred within my veins. Every fiber within me came to life, and my skin tingled. Not now, I begged.

My fatigued and stressed body worked double time to keep up, making it more difficult to ignore my soulmate's insistent demands. But I couldn't stop. No sleep. No food. No stopping. Not until we found Joy.

If my brothers could work nonstop, I could too until we found our sister. Ignoring the steps behind me, I focused on the ones running away from me. Materializing my scythe, I morphed it into a dagger and flicked it. Imbued with my essence, the knife sailed toward its target.

My muscles spasmed as pain coursed through my sore shoulders. Hunger pangs with two different origins hit my stomach. A big, fat cheeseburger sounded so good, but so did riding Shepherd's cock. The closest need was right behind me, a breath away from unleashing Lust. God, he smelled so good. Keeping my distance was imperative.

Hades! I didn't have time to entertain my curse with Joy out there somewhere.

I smiled when I heard the banshee cry out. I covered my ears as she screamed, and then I found her slouched around the corner. Even with my ears blocked, my skull throbbed with her shrieking. Sobbing, blood covered her hand as she tried to pull the dagger from her stomach. Using my power, I pushed it deeper inside her.

When I was close enough, I grabbed her neck and forced her to her feet. "Where is your cult leader?" Not waiting for an answer, I pushed her against the cave wall. My nails caught the surface, nicking them sharply. The slight pain stabbing my cuticles was nothing compared to the throbbing between my thighs. "Harvest has made all of you mindless," I muttered as I yanked her hair, tilting her chin upward.

"Fuck. You." She spat in my face. "He will make your sister wish she could die."

Instead of fury, grief sliced into my chest, and I staggered back, barely keeping my

hold on the demon.

“Prudence.” Shepherd growled behind me.

I focused on the bleeding banshee in front of me. She knew Harvest had Joy, but not about our funky powers. She would have thrown it in my face if she did.

Our powers disappeared three more times since Derrick took Joy. Each incident was brief, but it was a matter of when our mortality became permanent. We had to find Joy. If we didn’t... I choked on the lump in my throat as my eyes watered.

“You know nothing,” I croaked, narrowing my gaze at the banshee. “But that’s not why I’m here.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

“No,” she whispered. Her face paled as I held her head back. Before she screeched again, I covered her mouth. A Banshee’s scream could be lethal, and I didn’t have time for more pain.

“That scream right there is the reason I’ve come for you. You’ve lured and killed enough people over the century. Time for you to go to Hell.” Removing the dagger from her stomach, I kept her lips covered and opened the passage to the Devil’s domain. “Let’s see how much you enjoy being bad in Hell.”

Shepherd grasped my shoulders as I pushed her through. When it closed up, I sucked in a breath and tried to get away from his touch. My pussy was dripping wet, begging for him, and it didn’t help that he’d never left my side. And thanks to him being attuned to my emotions, he knew the agony my curse put me through. He knew how tired and hungry I was too.

“This has got to stop.” He spun me around.

My heart fluttered as I looked into his bright green stare—beautiful, angry one. I shoved at his chest, but touching him made Lust worse. “Not until we find Joy,” I mumbled.

“You’re not going to find her this way,” he muttered.

I glared. “You’re asking me to stop looking? Every second she’s not found, is another second they can kill...” My voice trembled. “If she loses her powers for longer than a few seconds. They can...”

“Stop saying it. Stop thinking about it.” Shepherd caressed my cheek, and his eyes turned violet. “I know how much Joy means to you...to all of you. Right now, I care about you. I feel all your aches and pains. You need rest, Princess.”

“No, I need to find my sister and kill the bastard that took her.”

“You probably won’t get the chance to kill the proxy. Your brothers won’t stop until they find him and destroy him themselves. But we’ll find Joy, Prudence.” He stood tall and pushed his shoulders back. The movement sent my heart fluttering like a caged bird. His half-lidded gaze flickered over me. “Now, are we going to do this the hard way or the easy way?”

I backed away, but he trailed his fingers over my cloak. No skin contact, but every part of me responded with goose bumps. “What do you mean?”

“I know what puts you to sleep,” he stated as he pulled me against him. “And I also know it’s something you need right now. I’m willing to let you rest first if you prefer.”

My pussy throbbed.

“I don’t have time for this,” I huffed as I tried to push him away.

“The hard way it is.” His grin told me he wasn’t all that disappointed by my choice. My heart raced as the surrounding scenery changed. He dematerialized all my clothes and my bare back hit soft silk sheets. Then he was above me, hiking up one leg and letting his hand roam over my pulsing clit.

“I love everything I can do to you with your powers.”

“Shut up,” I moaned. How did he manage my powers so quickly? Damn Soul Reaper.

My thighs quaked with my need for him. His touch was all I yearned for, and he'd give it to me. Even when I should be ignoring my needs and saving my—

“I want to do this to you forever,” he whispered into my ear.

Hades, he felt so terrific. He was my haven in this dark time. Hooking my arms around his neck, I breathed him in before tasting his salty skin. It was when he moved just enough to sear me with a scorching kiss that I gave in completely to Shepherd.

Yes.

“You feelsogood.” I traced my fingers down his back, and he arched beneath my touch. “Why do you feel this right? The worlds are crumbling, and yet why is this the only place I want to be?” I admitted. He kissed the tears away before they could slide into my hair. “In your arms.”

Raising up, he dragged me into a sitting position beside him. I splayed my hand on his chest as he spoke. “This soul reaper is yours. Your will, your safety, your life is mine. I live for you now and nothing else. I know I'm in this world for you. Nothing made sense until you about why I was born a soul reaper and why I survived, but now I could be a fucking speck on your shoulder and not care if it meant being by your side.”

“That's a lie,” I mumbled as I studied the darkened stare he tried to mask.

“You're right. A speck isn't strong enough to keep men away from you. I'd need to be a wolf.”

“That wouldn't work either. I need your touch. I want to finally feel you inside me.” I reached out and stroked his cock. “How can I if you were anything else but my soul reaper?”

His blazing violet eyes burned me with their intensity. “Prudence,” he croaked.

My grip on him slackened as he placed his lips against my neck, leaving a wet trail down to my heaving breasts. I stroked him. My nipples pebbled as his hot breath fanned against one, then the other.

“I want you,” I whimpered. “Now.”

“Easy, Princess.” He grasped my hand, stopping my movements. “I’ll deliver.”

Releasing his cock, I climbed onto his lap. “You know I’m more than ready. You’ve given me plenty of time.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

Guiding his length against my clit, he thrust between my slick folds. Oh... My skin heated as I watched. Back and forth. He moved so slowly my clit pulsed, and my body clenched every time his crown neared my opening. Please! He needed to stop prolonging. I wanted to experience sex with him so badly my body shook. Sliding between my slick folds again, Shepherd groaned, and my arms trembled as I held his shoulders to keep myself upright. Slightly delirious, I wanted to fall on my back and let him have his way with me. He controlled my hips above him instead, in no rush to push in or push me down and drive home.

Lowering his head, he watched as he moved my body. Oh, Hades. That's so sexy. Knowing my mate's attention was all mine.

"Shepherd." His purple gaze met mine, and it was like a door opened between us, welcoming me home. This. The connection between us. I never wanted to look away.

His brows pinched as if he was in pain. Shepherd leaned forward and dragged his lips over mine. Leisurely, we kissed until he exhaled and met my gaze. "Use me, Princess. Take me in," he commanded hoarsely. "Make us whole."

Raising up on my knees, Shepherd helped guide me until I was directly over his swollen cock. We held that precious eye contact. I held my breath. Heart beating like a caged bird, I sank down over his head. His girth stretched and filled me. My breath caught as a groan escaped Shepherd's mouth before he grabbed my hips and owned me completely.

Yes!

My body arched as Shepherd pulsed within me. I sensed every throb, every single inch of Shepherd. Lust burst through my skin, pushing me over the edge. We were one. He was inside me. The sensation was earth-shattering and so profound. My sin unraveled for him so effortlessly. Squeezing me snugly, Shepherd buried his face against my neck. “You grip me so tightly.” I felt his gaze on me as he spoke. “Look how easily you come for me.” Shaking from the euphoria rippling through me, all I could do was whimper.

Then he moved my hips over his, burying himself deeper before lifting me up. He thrust himself completely every time my body came down over his cock. My breasts jiggled, and I cried out as my body warmed, and my clit throbbed. His thighs and pubic hair, slick from my juices, and the wet smacks of our bodies coming together intoxicated me further.

“Holy—” I moaned when he gripped my ass cheeks strong enough to hurt. That’s when he slowed down, rolling my hips around instead of up and down. It felt amazing. I could engrave every languid stroke of his into my memory. Remember every pulse. The way his body shook, his soul reaper eyes brightening, and the shameless way he watched my body.

Shepherd panted. Sweat beaded his skin, and he kissed me fiercely before I pulled away. “Give it to me,” I begged into his ear as he wrapped his arms around my back and squeezed me so tightly it hurt. “You know what I want.”

“Fuck,” he moaned. His cock pulsated and thickened inside me as he stilled. I felt every single pulse of his release, and my insides clenched. His cum spurted out, filling me.

“So much!” I shuddered as waves of pleasure crashed through me. My face burned at how wanton and greedy I became for Shepherd’s sperm. I arched, and he held my back to keep me from toppling over. Wave after wave, the rapture kept rolling over

me like a storm until I was unable to move.

His hand rubbed my hair. The other sent goose bumps down my back as he ran his fingers across my skin. My eyes drooped.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, and I wanted to argue with him for doing this to me. But deep down, I knew I needed it. The last few days caught up to me.

So tired...

Need to look for Joy.

“Rest,” he ordered me.

So I did.

Thirty

Shepherd

“Need to look for Joy. Must find her...”

I listened to Prudence as she drifted asleep. But it’s strange. Her words had been inside my head. Did I imagine it? Curled in my arms, she appeared to be asleep but I could have sworn it sounded like it came from inside my mind. Lifting her chin, I checked to make sure she truly slept. She snored lightly. So adorable. And all mine...

Wait, what had I been thinking about? Ah, her voice inside my brain. Could it be another part of the bond? If so, I didn’t want to trouble her about it until she rested.

As I looked at her, my heart skipped a beat. With her mouth parted slightly, eyes closed, I knew right then that I was staring at my heart and soul. My everything.

Smiling down at her, I kissed her forehead and materialized clothes on both of us. Prudence needed her rest, but it didn't mean I didn't desire to wake her up and ravish her all over again.

But when my mate's eyes opened, she'd want to search for her sister. That mattered much more than my gratification. During the last few days, as she ran herself nonstop, I sensed her pain and despair.

She hadn't spoken to her family in the last twenty-four hours. They were all too busy trying to find someone they knew couldn't be found. Although Prudence's emotions were the only ones I sensed, I didn't doubt they all bore the same desperation. Prudence's failure, her helplessness bled through the bond, and all I wished to do was take it away.

Prudence's emotions made it seem like their efforts were futile. She said Harvest cloaked himself well, keeping them from finding him. So with Joy as his captive, the same applied to her. Despite how fruitless their task might be, they kept searching. It didn't matter to the Reapers that their powers were diminishing. They continued their daily duties while searching for Joy.

When Prudence woke, she'd wear herself down again. It took three days to get her to sleep. It helped that her fatigue and sin were on my side. For her sake, I hoped we found Joy. I spent a lifetime watching over my sibling. I couldn't bear to see my lover lose one in such a horrible way. If things went wrong... I shook the thought away. I couldn't bear the idea of Prudence crying.

Cradling her in my arms, I faded to Grim's castle. I would eventually need rest, but it seemed I could go longer without sleep than my immortal girlfriend. I smirked. She

was indeed a princess.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

As soon as I faded into the ballroom, I bumped into someone.

“Whoa!” Melanie, Prudence’s mom, wobbled slightly before turning around. I held Prudence so I couldn’t help Melanie. Luckily, she didn’t fall.

“Are you okay? I didn’t mean to fade right into someone,” I told her.

Instead of answering, Melanie’s palm went to her mouth quickly, visibly shaking, before she reached out for Prudence. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I assured her as she checked Prudence’s forehead. “She wore herself out. She’s asleep.”

Melanie frowned. “You can lay her on the couch.”

“I’d rather not,” I admitted. “Prudence goes where I go.”

Melanie’s brow lifted as she smiled. “Well, okay.”

“Anything on Joy?” I asked, but immediately regretted it.

Melanie’s chin trembled and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Nothing yet,” Grim replied. After his wife left the room, he added, “I’m heading out now. I’m glad you’re here. Fear’s out searching with the others so he can’t stay. I need someone to watch over Payne.”

“Payne?” I tensed. Although I understood that Payne was going through something, I still didn’t like him near Prudence.

“Come.” Grim gestured for me to follow. “You must see it for yourself.”

Thirty-One

Prudence

A sigh tumbled from my lips as I stretched and opened my eyes. I frowned, looking around slowly when I saw I was cradled on Shepherd’s lap in the infirmary, a room for the other Reapers to heal. His eyes were shut, and his head bent forward. How could he sleep in such an uncomfortable position? Then again, how long did I slumber in his arms? And how did he bring me to Dad’s castle without waking me?

The smell of disinfectant filled my nostrils, and I bolted out of Shepherd’s arms. How long was I out? Every hour I napped was another that Harvest had Joy. Did we lose our powers while I rested? I didn’t know.

“Prudence,” Shepherd warned, hand sliding against my back as he stood.

I took in his unkempt hair and bloodshot eyes. My stomach knotted. I’d put him through a lot over the last few days. I would be the death of him.

“Calm yourself. Nothing can be done by stressing out.”

“We need to—” My stomach growled. When did I last eat?

“Eat,” Shepherd ordered. “We can’t go anywhere, anyway.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

Shepherd sighed and grasped my wrist, tugging me forward. In front of us was a white curtain. He pushed it back, and I gasped. “What is that?” Even as I asked, I had my suspicion. I could sense the faint traces of Payne’s essence beneath the blazing flames. I stepped forward, but Shepherd pulled me back.

“Don’t get any closer. Your brothers caught on fire bringing him here.”

Payne wasn’t lying on a bed. I saw the flow of power—a blackish-blue color holding him steady in the air so the flames covering him couldn’t touch anything. Dad’s power bound Payne in the air for the castle’s protection. But I couldn’t see him beneath the flames.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked.

“No one knows,” Shepherd replied. “August and Barron found him like that while searching for Joy. Whatever this is its most likely a part of him.”

A ball of unease rested in my throat the longer I looked at him. Payne’s scent along with his essence were diminishing. “Why are we here exactly?” I asked nervously.

“To watch him.” Shepherd exhaled slowly. “Don’t pretend you don’t sense it. He’s altering beneath those flames. Grim said no one’s been able to identify what he is. I think you’re all about to find out, and I don’t know if that will be a good or bad thing.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

“He’s still Payne,” I began. “The one who always walks the straight and narrow. He’s the one that never bends or breaks. The one that stands between my brothers even though he’s mortal.”

Shepherd caressed my shoulder. “Why are you telling me that, Princess?” My eyes filled with tears. He knew. As did I. I was trying to reassure myself that Payne was still Payne.

But those flames licking around his body were doing something. Somehow, his scent and spirit were transforming.

“Seems like my son will finally get his answer.” I turned at the sound of Molly’s voice. She got as close as she could to Payne before sweat coated her forehead. Her voice was ragged as she spoke. “I don’t sense him beneath that.” Claspng her shaking hands together, Payne’s mother’s eyes rimmed with tears as she looked at me. “Is it really him?” Molly was a ghost given Reaper powers. She was retired and had none of the abilities we possessed, so she couldn’t sense how rapidly her son’s scent and essence changed.

“It’s him.”

Molly straightened her shoulders. “I don’t care what’s beneath there. He can be a monster for all I care. That’s my son and I’m going to wait right here for him to...”

“Evolve,” Shepherd finished for her. “It’s safe to assume he’s entering a new cycle in his life. If you look close enough through the flames, his body is in a cocoon.”

I squinted as I searched through the flames, then my jaw dropped. Shepherd was right. Something brown wrapped around Payne. It was why no one could see him. Then it dawned on me.

“Could the flames be protecting him? Maybe he’s vulnerable right now, and it keeps anything from hurting him? Question, what will he be when he comes to?”

“No matter,” Molly said. “I will wait righthere,” she pointed to the chair, “so I can smack him for not coming to visit me. And for scaring the shit out of me like this. He’s going to be so heartbroken when he wakes...” Molly drifted off, and our eyes met. Did she know about Payne’s feelings toward Joy? All that time I thought I was the only one. “We have to find Joy,” Molly said solemnly.

Suddenly the castle shook, and we heard piercing squawks. My knees wobbled, and Shepherd pulled me to his chest. We all looked toward the ceiling.

“What was that?” Shepherd asked.

“I’m guessing the dragons,” I said as a wing came through the infirmary window. Glass shattered, and the roars intensified. The female bent her head and roared at the male who shoved her against the castle. The male whined when she bit his neck. As he retreated, the female broke free. Her wings smacked him in the face. He squawked and bolted after her. I ran to the window and looked up, then sighed. All the dragons appeared to be fighting. On a closer look, however, I realized what was happening. “It’s mating season. It comes once every century for them.”

“They kill each other?” Shepherd asked.

“No, they fight the one they wish to conquer. And when they do, they claim them.”

---

Shepherd and I stayed with Molly the entire day before Fear came. Shepherd and I gave them privacy. We didn't have the luxury of waiting around, anyway. Joy had yet to be found, and we had to continue our Reaper work, or we'd be encouraging the end to arrive sooner.

It was unsettling. We had no idea who or what Payne was. With his essence vanishing, would he still be the friend we knew and loved? Joy would have been right there beside him, but she dealing with the unknown too.

Derrick. Harvest. I didn't know who I should hate more.

In the human world, I held my scythe tightly, ignoring the anger pulsing in my veins, and opened the passage. The elderly ghost watched me warily and hobbled into the tunnel as if her life depended on it.

"You're unsettling the ghosts with your glower," Shepherd said from behind me. He had become like a shadow, always close by. His reaping form rippled as he stepped out of the darkened corner and approached me. His violet eyes were bright in contrast to his black form.

"Are you sure she wasn't running because she saw you in the corner?" I asked.

"Let's go chase after some bad demons. I'm hungry, princess. Unless." He moved closer. "You want to let me play with you in my reaping form?"

My pussy throbbed. His words reminded me we hadn't gotten to explore that yet. But with Joy gone, Payne changing, and the world ending, how could I indulge in all the things I wished to? It felt wrong to enjoy my soulmate. Shame seeped into my bones, sagging my shoulders.

"Hey! None of that now." Shepherd rippled closer.

Averting my eyes from his purple gaze, I said, “Nothing makes sense anymore, and I feel like I know nothing. We can’t reach Joy. She’s gone.” Rubbing my chest, my head lowered. “I can’t sense her at all.”

Shifting into his human shape, Shepherd hugged me. “You might not be able to reach her, but that doesn’t mean she’s gone forever. Your family is strong. All of you will get through this.”

“She’s so sweet. She won’t be able to endure whatever they—”

“Stop,” Shepherd commanded.

My phone chimed in my pocket, and I pulled it out. I looked to Shepherd next. “It’s Dad. He’s calling us all to the castle.”

The tension was thick in the air as we waited for Dad to speak. Missing two, I thought, glancing around the solemn room. The knowledge settled against my bones until they ached. I felt Joy and Payne's absence immensely.

Shepherd sat on the couch arm. I leaned against him. My soulmate pressed me about the marks lately. It seemed he'd reached his limit for patience. Tonight, I would tell him a lot about the symbols. No more secrets between us.

Eventually, I would learn to accept happiness when I could, no matter the circumstances.

Sebastian, Isabella, and Kitty sat beside us on the couch. In the back corner were Maureen and Jackal. Standing like he was ready to leave was Barron with his Gwendolyn. At the window was August. Dad faded in, and Mom rose to her feet. He took her hand and guided her to the sofa across from us.

"We'll be quick," Dad muttered as he ran his hand through his hair. That was how I noticed the black gloves he wore. Since when did he wear them like Isabella? "Our Reapers are working around the clock to catch up on the work we've ignored over the last few days while searching for Joy."

"Sickness has grown during that time as well," Jackal said from the back of the room. He never spoke much. His focus was always on Maureen, but his words rang true. They needed to be out in the human world, curing diseases instead of there with us.

“Harvest knows about our powers,” Dad studied his glove as he spoke. “There’s no doubt about that, but we must stop looking for Joy.”

“What?” Kitty and I screeched at the same time.

“Let me finish.” Dad exhaled. “We won’t find Joy. We can’t even find Harvest, but our powers disappearing have actually given us the opportunity to find her.”

“Please, tell me how the fuck being mortal for random amounts of time will help us find her?” Maureen yelled.

“Because they’ll come to us,” August answered for Dad. My greedy brother never once looked away from the window. But I was glad, nonetheless. He hadn’t been around much since the human festival.

“You expect Harvest to come here again?” Sebastian asked, cracking his knuckles. “I’m always happy to kill the bastard. As many times as it takes.”

“If not him, someone.” Barron crossed his arms. “You want to catch one of his, don’t you?”

“Foolish,” August murmured what I was thinking. “Harvest cares about nothing. He’d sacrifice all of his followers if it meant claiming the Devil’s throne.”

“No, that’s not my plan.” Dad shook his head and gazed at us as if he were waiting for someone to crack the puzzle first.

August finally looked away from the window, lips curling slightly. “You want to bug one.”

I smirked. That could work. Place trackers on anyone we encountered. “That means

we should let some live,” I uttered, still processing the idea, and not liking it.

“Now you’re getting it.” Dad smiled, and Mom’s hand tightened on his knee.

“Why couldn’t you have just started with that?” Maureen grumbled.

“We won’t find Joy,” Dad’s voice deepened. “We’ll let them lead us to her.”

For the first time in days, my hope soared. We had a plan.

Thirty-Two

Shepherd

Ever since her sister’s abduction, Prudence’s pink essence had dimmed. It wasn’t until her father spoke and announced a plan that it perked up. With a renewed hope, my princess swung her blade and happily hacked through the quickly approaching demons.

I was starting to understand that bonds went beyond the one connecting me to Prudence. In a different way, she had an equally strong one with her family. I wanted to make sure she never lost it.

We were at a bar in the City of the Dead. Prudence cut away at demons while I ate their souls. Demons seemed to have one thing in common—talking shit to Prudence. It didn’t matter what kind of monsters they were, they all loved spewing nonsense about Reapers being doomed to failure. Were they brainwashed to believe that fate? While it was a possibility, it was an outcome I refused to entertain. But their words angered me, nonetheless. If I allowed bloodlust to overcome me, I’d kill them before Prudence could, and then she’d complain. Unfortunately, I would never apologize for ending a creature who was cruel to my mate.

Over the last hour, I saw her gazing at me. The way her azure eyes flickered over my reaping form nearly put me on edge. Because of Prudence's arousal flowing through the bond, my shadowy mass was an erratic web of passion. She remained at a distance, but her candy-rum goodness still beckoned me. Knowing her pussy was most likely drenched made my reaping form vibrate like thunder.

In the end, I'd always carry the advantage in our relationship. There would never be an emotion she could hide from me. We'd most likely argue about it some nights. But it also meant I'd be able to understand her in ways no one else could. And that made me fucking glad. No one would love her the way I could. No one was more perfect for her than me.

"What are you thinking about?" Prudence asked as I slipped through a warlock and gobbled up his soul. He didn't make a sound until his body smacked the ground with a thud. He was the last one in the bar. Bodies, lying in pools of multi-colored blood, littered the ground around us.

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

“You know...” I flowed closer to her. “The fact that you’re staying at least ten feet away from me no matter where we go.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip before smiling. “Fine. You don’t want to tell me? I’ll know your thoughts soon enough, Soul Reaper.”

I paused. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Prudence shrugged and batted her eyes. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” Watching me closely, her blue eyes sparkled beneath the bar lights as I quickened my pace. She sidestepped.

“Are you trying to run from me?” I asked. “Tell me what you meant.”

“I might tell you. It depends.” She stopped and waited.

“On what?”

“What you do next,” she teased.

Moving over several corpses, I reached Prudence. Thankfully, she didn’t try to flee.

“You’re standing on dead bodies.” Forming a hand in my miasma, I swept her cloak aside, slipping my shadowy limb up her shirt.

She sucked in a breath. “All I see and feel is you.”

“Tell me how much you want me to touch you this way.” I pressed my form against her, gliding my mass down her skin until goose bumps erupted across her flesh. Pressure built inside me. Fuck. My soul craved, needed to be with her. After all, I was a fucking creature that wilted flower petals during her absence. I decayed without her.

Prudence sighed as I dragged tiny bits of my form inside her bra and tugged at her nipples. “I want you to show me. Because I’m not sure what my body yearns for.” Chest rising and falling with her deep pants, Prudence shut her eyes and leaned nearer, seeking me out.

“Me either,” I admitted. “But let’s find out together what our souls want.”

My mate’s pink essence burst from her, becoming erratic as it tangled around me. I shuddered, and so did Prudence. Her soul was light and soft—like magic against my own soul. In her presence, I felt complete.

Dematerializing all of her clothes except her cloak, the material spread out underneath her when I pushed her backward until she laid on the stage. I could take her body and pleasure anywhere, but I didn’t want filth touching her. I hiked her legs up, parting them so I could take in her dripping cunt.

God, Prudence was so gorgeous. I paused and stared at her, overwhelmed by her beauty.

I teased her clit with my shadowy limb, and she arched, crying out. Then I fondled her tits, her nipples, and the space over her rounded hips. I traced her lips, eyes, and collarbone with a dark finger.

Again, I stopped to admire her. How did I get so lucky?

My soul brightened and expanded the more I explored her. Prudence’s lust climbed

and filled my nostrils. My princess's eyes became hazy as she stared. And she let me touch and enter her. Her soul rubbed itself down the back of my black soul, making my shadow ripple. I groaned.

Fuck.

My miasma morphed into the silhouette of a man. I pushed my cock against her opening. Her eyes locked in on our bodies, ass wiggling as she moaned. "Just do it," she whispered. "God, Shepherd, I need you to take me any, every way possible."

I thrust and stretched her until she whimpered. "Your body takes all of me so well, princess," I murmured as a vortex of desire spun me out of control. Pulling out, I pushed back in. I shook and shimmered. As my pleasure climbed, I felt my soul pulling to my center. My solid form drew closer to the surface.

Her pussy spasmed around me as I thrust harder. When her hand went up to grab my arms securing her hips, her fingers slipped through and she huffed. "I can't hold you." My pleasure intensified knowing Prudence was at my mercy.

Unable to control it, my body solidified above her. As soon as it happened, she latched onto me. "I'm coming," my princess whimpered, fingers digging into my flesh. Her bouncing tits, the way her body clenched around me, and those beautiful glassy eyes were my unraveling.

Fuck. No matter what form I was in, it would always be a struggle not to shift. I'm a goner.

It was bliss seeing her come undone. Glancing down, I thrust inside and watched. A shot of ecstasy erupted in my stomach. My mate's juices covered my cock, and the crown swelled with my pending release.

Dragging her nails across my chest, Prudence stopped at the curse mark. Her arousal spread out like waves crashing over me through the bond. Wrapping her legs around me, she leaned back and pulled me above her. Linking her arms around my neck, the princess brought her mouth to mine. Teeth and tongues clashed.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. She was in control. She wiggled and thrust herself on my cock. When she sucked on my bottom lip, my body shook, and my balls tightened. Did my mate want my cum?

“Fuck,” I groaned.

## Page 93

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

Lowering myself, I held her close and thrust once more. Stars crossed my vision as I spilled my seed inside her. I whispered dirty nonsense in her ear as her pussy milked me to the last drop. Her body greedily clenched around me. Raising slightly, I savored her beauty. Head thrown back and mouth agape, Prudence orgasmed over and over.

There was nothing else I wanted to do with my life than share it with Prudence Reaper. Her need for my semen was still shocking, but I was really fucking glad. It gave me an opportunity to get closer to my mate and discover who she was.

Steal my soul, my heart, and my cum.

I chuckled, kissing her neck gently. I'm a lucky demon.

Thirty-Three

Prudence

Steal my soul, my heart, and my cum.

I'm a lucky demon.

A zing of pleasure ran down my spine at his inner rambling. I didn't see how my soulmate could get me any hotter after the dirty things he'd whispered in my ear, but then I heard his thoughts.

Your thoughts are dirty. His eyes zeroed in on my lips, and I smirked.

“What...”The soul reaper’s ruminations trailed off.

My pussy throbbed again as Shepherd studied me. His reaping form touching me, along with the way my essence wrapped around him, had been beautiful and mind-blowing. I want to do all that again.

“Do what? Her lips aren’t moving. Am I imagining it?”he thought.

I waited, giving Shepherd time to process all he heard from me. His eyes narrowed as confusion clouded his mind.

“Prudence...” He tilted his head, staring intently at my mouth. The urge to laugh tickled my stomach and chest. “You’re saying so much, but your mouth isn’t moving.”

“You mean I’m thinking so much. I can’t help that you can hear my brain.”

Shepherd’s bright purple gaze dragged over me. So handsome...

“They won’t go back green if you don’t stop talking like that,” he replied aloud.

“Thinking,” I corrected him. “I was thinking. Not talking.”

“You’re in my head thinking too?” he asked incredulously. “Damn Princess, my thoughts are already filled with you. And now you’re inside them too?”

“I’ve already stolen your soul, your heart, and your cum, right? Why wouldn’t I want your mind too?”

“You hear mine too?”

“Is that bad?”

His mouth stretched wide before he kissed me. “Not at all, but between your thoughts and mine, we’ll never accomplish anything.”

I laughed at that, but broke off quickly when his cock pulsed, thickening inside me.

“Want to tell me how we’re in each other’s heads?”

Tracing my curse mark on his chest, I tapped it with my finger. “I’ve known who you were from the moment I saw my mark against your skin. Just like you sensed who I was when your soul found mine.”

His eyes brightened. “She’s mine.”

“I can hear you!” I pinched his shoulder, but my mate didn’t even acknowledge it. He just stared and fingered the pink goat above my breast.

“Tell me what it means.” Shepherd leaned down and popped one of my nipples in his mouth, then stopped when I moaned. “I have an idea, but until you confirm it—I’ve been too afraid to be happy about it.”

*Source Creation Date: August 17, 2025, 11:47 am*

I gasped when he went on to the other nipple. “The reason I came to you to in your dreams and again at that moldy bar is because of that pink goat on your chest. You’re my—”

“Soulmate,” Shepherd finished for me with a slight growl in his voice. “I don’t deserve you, and yet... This makes me so...”

“You already called me your mate,” I pointed out, watching the way his smile grew as he gawked at my curse mark. “Why are you so happy when you’ve already claimed me as yours?”

He blinked like I’d grown two heads and said, “You just told me we belong to one another. That through all the shit, the loneliness I’ve been through, I can finally say I have someone that needs me as much as I need them. Prudence, you don’t understand how much I wanted to be yours too. How much I wanted to be everything for you.”

My eyes watered. “Even without this mark, you’d matter,” I said. “I love you, Shepherd Donovan. I think I did from the moment I saw you standing there at the human festival. You took my breath, flipped my curse upside down, and it scared the shit out of me.”

“You scared me, too. The way you consumed me so quickly when I was ready to leave this world. I barely existed, and then your presence came along and demanded everything from me. I love you, Prudence Reaper. Let’s fight. Let’s save this world and your sister, because no time will ever be enough with you. I want it all.” He caressed my cheek, and my heart fluttered in my chest as if he was holding it. In a way, he was. “Forever.”

“Forever,” I agreed.

THE END