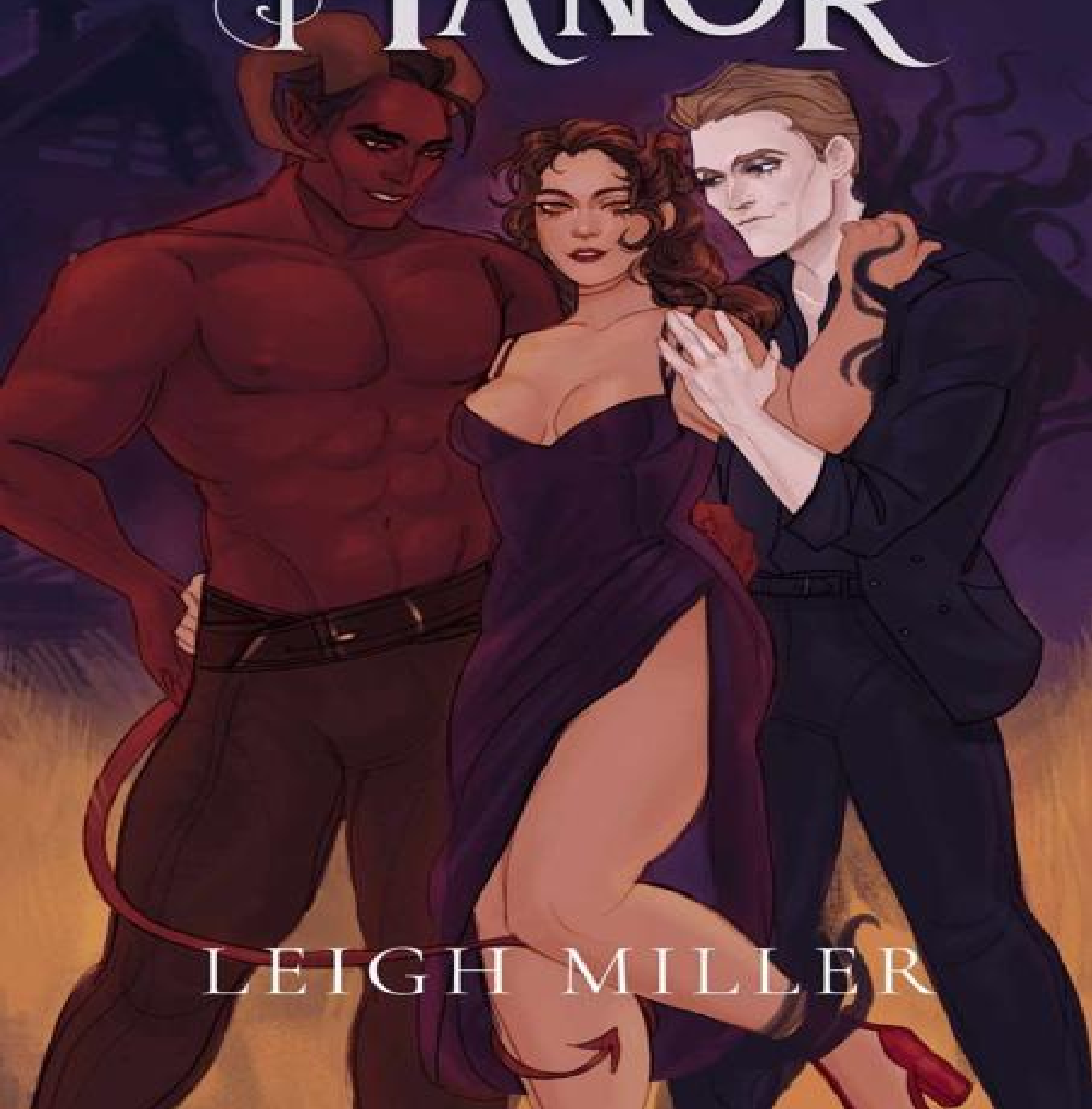


MONSTERS' MANOR



LEIGH MILLER

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Leigh Miller

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To A - Publishing this one on my birthday, so I'll expect the celebratory bouquet to be twice as big this time around.

1

The sound of screaming fills the October night.

Up the sloped lawn leading to a forbidding three-story Gothic manor, wending its way around the colorful tents of the night market, weaving in and out of the largest corn maze west of the Mississippi.

Luckily, it's the fun kind of screaming.

Peals of thrilled laughter, shrieks of delighted fright, and shouts of surprise echo all around the grounds of Edgar's Acres.

In the pink and orange twilight, most of the night's guests are just beginning to file in. The crowd is thick as I dart around groups of friends and couples on dates, dodging solo thrill seekers and teenagers pretending to be braver than they are.

And this is still early in the season.

By Samhain, the crowds will have doubled, if not tripled. Guests from hundreds or thousands of miles away will flock to one of the country's most notorious full-service haunted experiences.

The magick in the air is contagious—dark and stirring and edged with an effervescent thrill. It's no wonder why so many come so far to see it for themselves.

Not that I have the time or inclination to appreciate it. I've got five minutes until I'm supposed to be at work, and one supremely irritating demon hellbent on making me late.

"Wait up, Rosie."

No one calls me Rosie. It's Rose. Or Rosemary. I don't do cutesy nicknames.

"No," I snap at him without breaking my stride. "I don't have time to talk."

At five minutes to six, the line of waiting guests is starting to really stack up, and I'm sure the harpy I work with in the ticket booth is already annoyed I'm not there.

"Yes, you do," Renwick—the supremely irritating demon—tells me,

smug as shit. “You’ve got a few minutes before your shift, and Odelia wanted me to talk to you.”

I fight a flinch and keep walking. Of course she did.

“She wants you to train with me.”

Of course she does.

“Not interested.”

It’s been my answer for the last two weeks, since the day I arrived on my aunt Odelia’s doorstep. At some point I know she’s going to stop asking and start demanding, but I hope today isn’t that day.

“Come on, Rosie,” Renwick goads. “I’d be gentle with you. We’d take it nice and easy, warm up all that magick you’ve been neglecting before we—”

Just the mention of my magick is enough to send a wave of icy fear down my spine.

I whirl around to face him, only to find myself a few short inches away from a very firm, very bare chest.

Renwick’s maroon skin stretches taut over bulging pecs, broad shoulders, and biceps the size of tree trunks. He’s got abs on abs on abs that dip into a deep vee of muscle straining over the top of the skin-tight black leather pants he’s wearing.

It’s just one more thing I can’t stand about this demon. He’s attractive as hell, and he knows it.

When I drag my attention away from all that skin and meet his gaze again, Renwick’s crimson eyes are glowing with laughter.

Those satanic eyes aren’t even the most monstrous part of him. His head is crowned with a pair of huge, ram-like horns that curl over the back of his skull, and his face is all chiseled angles and strong jaw and sinfully full lips, more brutally beautiful than any human man I’ve ever met.

He’s also got a tail, and honest-to-Goddess *tail*, flicking back and forth behind him.

But no matter how handsome he is, I’m not about to back down and give him what he wants.

“I said no.”

That, at least, gets him to shut up for a few seconds.

In the wake of my refusal, we face each other in a silent standoff. He crosses his thick arms over his chest and fixes his demonic gaze squarely on me.

To say I’m not interested in training my magick would be the

understatement of the century.

It doesn't matter that I'm a Bramwell witch from a long line of talented Bramwell witches. It doesn't matter that my father's family has run Edgar's Acres for almost a hundred years. It doesn't matter that I had to cast off any little slivers of pride when I showed up and asked Odelia for help, knowing she'd take me in for all those reasons.

I came to my aunt with nowhere else left to go. I needed a job, and whether that's taking tickets or directing traffic in the parking lot or scrubbing toilets, I don't really care. I'm just absolutely not about to tap into my magick. As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't exist.

If only Odelia hadn't given me her damned ultimatum.

Before I can get any more lost in my brooding, the sound of voices snaps me back to attention. It also unfortunately means I lose the staring contest as I break Renwick's gaze and take a step back to let the approaching humans pass.

The handful of guests headed toward the gates shoot curious glances our way. The group is mainly women, and most of them are looking at Renwick—either admiring the impressive cut of his muscles or trying to wrap their minds around how in the world his 'costume' looks so real.

Like they always do, though, those questioning looks disappear after a few moments. The guests go right back on their merry way, having completely forgotten they ever had a question in their minds in the first place.

The enchantments buzzing in the autumn air ensure no one ever looks too closely at the Edgar's Acres staff.

The whole place is spelled with charms that make guests suspend their disbelief and keep them from looking too long or too hard. They allow all the monsters who staff the manor to exist as they are.

In the mundane world, those same monsters might have to put on glammers or keep to shifted forms to blend in, but at Edgar's Acres that's not the case. The bigger, scarier, more outlandish, the better.

Still, the enchantments don't stop guests from getting an appropriate thrill while they're here, and the demon at my side takes full advantage of that fact as the group passes. He gives the humans a roguish grin and a growl, drawing a couple of shrieks of laughter as they continue on toward the Acres.

"Nice," I deadpan. "Very scary."

The insult lands with all the impact of a dandelion seed on a breeze. Renwick's grin never falters as he turns back to face me.

“I *am* very scary,” he says, all overblown confidence and bravado. “You should join me in the Parlor and find out.”

I fight back a shudder of revulsion. Just the idea of it, of what joining him in the manor’s ‘Lucifer’s Parlor’ scene would mean for me...

Fire magick.

That’s what Odelia wants me to work on honing. The magick I want nothing to do with. The magick that landed me in this whole damn mess in the first place.

Hard fucking pass.

Not feeling any need to respond to that remark, I start back toward the ticket booth with my demon escort right on my heels.

We pass a few more cast members on our way up the hill. A werewolf on the prowl, a couple of vampires hamming it up in pale-white face makeup and dramatic capes with fangs on full display. At the front gate, the two gargoyles standing sentry on either side come to life, leaping up and drawing more shrieks and laughter from the group of guests ahead of us.

The one on the right side—Howard, I think his name is—gives me a wink as Renwick and I pass through before settling onto his perch and morphing back into his stone-like state.

The mood inside the Acres darkens with the falling twilight. The late afternoon and early evening are more geared toward families, toned down for the sake of tender hearts.

But after dark? After dark all bets are off.

After dark, the manor’s monsters let their beastly sides come out to play, and every night they prove again why Edgar’s Acres has won its hard-earned reputation for being the most terrifying attraction in the upper Midwest.

Beyond the talented cast and crew, more of Odelia’s careful spellwork and the enchantments our family has laid down and tended for three generations spring up the deeper you venture into the Acres. Safe for mortals, the magick influences emotion and perception, lightly manipulating guests’ experiences to ensure no one leaves anything less than wonderfully frightened and awed.

It’s an impressive feat, even amongst magick folk. When my father—Odelia’s brother—was still alive, he used to tell me all about it with pride threaded through his voice.

Not that it matters now, and not that it means I want to be a part of it.

I’m only going to be here for as long as it takes me to figure out my next

move. Or until Odelia gets sick of my attitude and tells me to hit the road. Whichever comes first.

When I turn to leave Renwick behind and head into the ticket booth to start my shift, he stops me with a hand on my shoulder. A massive, maroon hand with wicked black claws tipping every finger. Ignoring the little jolt of surprise that moves through me at the warmth of his touch, I shake his hand off and glare at him.

“You sure you’re satisfied with that, Rose?” he asks, nodding toward the booth.

“I am. And what makes you think I’d be any more satisfied training with you?” Too late, I realize how that came out and mentally curse myself at the gleam in his eye.

“Oh. I certainly think I could satis—”

“Is there a problem here?” another familiar voice asks, cutting through the night air with the unsettling quality of being everywhere and nowhere all at once.

The shade the voice belongs to appears a moment later.

Well, *appear* might be a generous word for it.

Silas isn’t quite... solid. In the most literal sense. As a shade, he exists mostly in shadows, able to disintegrate completely into darkness and reappear anywhere he wants in a matter of seconds or minutes, depending on the distance. And even when he reconfigures into a man-shaped figure cloaked in wisps of darkness that spread from him like ink in water, there’s something about his form that makes it hard to fix your eye on any given spot. Shifting, swirling, never quite restful or solid enough to make out what he really looks like.

Despite his somewhat unsettling presence, I like Silas. He’s been kind to me since the day I arrived at Edgar’s Acres, and seems to have a knack for showing up to play referee just when Renwick is about to push me into snapping at him. It’s part of Silas’s job here—helping to monitor the manor and maze and market and the rest of the grounds to ensure everyone is safe.

And apparently making sure the new witch doesn’t wind up murdering Odelia’s star demon has been added to his list of duties.

Renwick pulls back, shooting the shade an irritated look. “No problem, Sy, just making sure Rosie here knows I’m available to start her training whenever she’s ready.”

“And I was just telling Renwick I have no interest in training with him.”

Silas's shadows shift and he lets out a sound that might be a sigh, but it's lost in the night air a moment later.

"Ren, I think I heard Kella was looking for you. There's a problem with some of the lighting in the Parlor."

Renwick doesn't quite look like he believes Silas, but apparently he's done annoying me for the evening because he just nods and turns to go.

I let out an irritated breath, glaring after him.

"Ignore him," Silas says gently, one of his shadows brushing against my shoulder in a not-quite-caress.

I can only make out the barest hint of an expression on the shadowed planes of his face, but there's something affectionate and a little sad there as he watches Renwick stalk off.

"Is that what you do? Ignore him?"

I'm not really sure what their deal is. By the way they interact with each other and the knowing looks they get from the rest of the crew, there seems to be something there. What that *something* is, I have no idea, and I definitely don't know either of them well enough to ask about it outright.

Silas's next words are laced with rueful laughter. "No, Rosemary, I don't ignore him. I fear I would find that all but impossible."

Before I can reply, Margot—one of my distant cousins who also works for Odelia—marches over with a clipboard in hand, frowning sharply.

"Aren't you supposed to be in the booth already?"

"Yeah," I say, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice. "Just headed in."

"Good," she says, then turns to Silas. "Can you check in on Mira down in the market? She was having an issue with a guest who wasn't happy with their tarot reading."

Silas tells Margot he will, and she's gone with a whirl of the dramatic black dress she's wearing, ready to go off and interrogate someone else with her clipboard and drill-sergeant's attitude.

"Have a good evening, Rosemary," Silas says, voice low and kind. "And if you'd like, I can speak to Ren. Let him know to ease up a little."

"No," I say quickly. "I can handle the demon."

His shadows shift again and I catch a flash of something that looks almost like concern. It's gone in an instant, replaced by more darkness and a quiet laugh.

"I have no doubt you can."

With that, all his darkness fades into the evening around us. I'm left alone, blinking at the spot he disappeared.

Shaking my head to clear away the strangeness of this place—of Silas, of Renwick, of the faint stirrings of magick beneath my skin I'm doing my damndest to ignore—I let out a long breath and head into the booth to start my shift.

2

I manage to avoid the demon and the shade for the next couple of days.

I keep my head down and work my shifts. In the time I'm not working, I hang out in the cottage I'm staying in while I'm here. It's in the little staff village down the hill and through the woods from the Acres where a lot of the seasonal crew stay.

Having this place is more charity I don't want, and more of a reminder I need to be making my plan to get out of here as soon as I can.

Only, every time I open my laptop to fill out a job application and stare at the little box that asks why I left my last position, a bubble of panic rises in my throat. All I can do is lie by omission and leave it blank, and hope nobody asks about it if and when I snag any interviews.

After all, I doubt any other accounting firms want to hire an arsonist.

I'm not an arsonist, I *swear* I'm not, but if anyone asked my old supervisor he would swear up and down that I am. After what I've started mentally referring to as *The Incident*, there's no chance in hell I could use anyone from that company as a reference, and would be denied a job on the spot if any potential new employer called to check why I left.

I can't think about that now, though. All I can do is keep applying, keep my fingers crossed, and hope I get some kind of offer before Samhain. It's the deadline my aunt's given me to either finish out my temp position at the Acres and get the hell out, or come on board full time and take up my place in the family business.

Which would absolutely include embracing the magick I've worked so hard to ignore these last fifteen years.

Guilt and worry gnaw on the bottom of my belly as I spend the morning and afternoon searching and applying for jobs. An hour before my shift starts, my eyes are glazed over from so much screen time, so I shut my laptop and slump into the worn sofa in my cottage's front room.

Even though I close my eyes and try to relax, a shaky, anxious sort of energy creeps in with all the rest of my worries. Through my veins, over my

skin, making my palms itch and an uncomfortable warmth settle into my chest.

Unable to sit still, I stand and head for the door. I'm not sure where exactly I'm going, but the crisp afternoon air feels good against my face as I step outside. I breathe it deep and let it expel some of my nerves.

A small wooded area separates the staff village from the hill leading up to the Acres, and the crunch of leaves under my boots is another satisfying distraction as I work to sort through my racing thoughts.

Just like last night, the early evening air hasn't quite bloomed into its darker edge yet, and I get another wink from Howard when I walk through the front gates.

I give him a wave in return, and a small knot of guilt climbs up the back of my throat. Despite my reluctance to be here and my contentious relationship with my aunt, most of the Edgar's Acres crew has been friendly and welcoming. After getting over my initial shock at being part of a workplace full of monsters, it's been easy enough to get along with everyone.

Well. Almost everyone.

Slipping through the gates, I pass by the ticket booth and take a hard right, away from the manor and the gigantic corn maze on the other side of the grounds.

The night market is my favorite part of Edgar's Acres. Sprawled out on the rolling hilltop, its brightly colored tents are filled with monsters and witches selling all kinds of goods and magickal services.

A few of the vendors wave or nod greetings as I pass by. A harpy works a cider press with a mouthwatering apple and cinnamon scent wafting out. A basilisk tends a stand filled with candles and soaps, though he's in his shifted form right now and looks like any normal human, aside from eyes a brilliant shade of gold with slitted reptilian pupils.

A witch and an ogre bicker playfully over their stall filled with herbs and botanicals, interrupted when the ogre leans down to catch her mouth in a kiss steamy enough I have to look away to give them some privacy.

It's another thing about being at the Acres that's surprised me—how open the staff tends to be with their PDA. It gets tamped down a bit when more guests are around, but there's a freedom and openness about relationships and sex amongst the witches and monsters who work here. An acceptance that means nobody bats an eye or seems to judge what anyone else gets up to after close of business.

Turning my attention away from the embracing couple, I wander through more of the stalls. I could get lost in this place for hours. It's the perfect distraction from my worries, enough color and curiosities to let myself forget about everything for a little while.

I'm busy doing just that when a noise startles me out of my thoughts.

"Rosemary," a voice calls out from one of the booths.

The stall is swathed in colorful fabrics and tapestries, with signs out front detailing a wide range of psychic services on offer. There are candles shining from within, and all the shiny baubles and talismans hung amongst the draped cloth just beg guests to wander in and take a closer look.

The witch who steps out of the booth is just as striking. With her long black hair pulled into a messy braid, and dark makeup framing bottle-green eyes, Mira has an undeniably alluring aura about her. Something still and knowing, an almost deceptive placidness on her surface that masks a hidden depth beneath.

As she steps out of the booth to greet me, the belt of metallic bead-work at her waist jangles slightly where it's draped over layers of skirts in flowy sapphire and emerald fabric. Her black top is sleeveless, showing off arms covered in intricate tattoos.

"Hey Mira," I say with a smile.

She's one of the few witches at the Acres I'm not related to. From what I've gathered, she's something of a nomad, and this is only her second season working her booth in the market. Mira has been warm and open every time I've spoken with her, and it makes me feel a little more at ease talking to another relative newbie.

"Enjoying the market?" she asks, and I nod.

I really am enjoying it. So much to see, hear, and smell. A thread of magick in the air that feels almost inviting, despite my lingering apprehension about being back amongst the witches who might have raised me if things in my life had gone differently.

"Can I interest you in a reading?" Mira gestures back toward the booth. "It's on the house."

"Oh, that's alright. I don't want to take up any of your time if you're busy."

She looks left and right at the relatively quiet market and raises an eyebrow. "Can't say I'm particularly busy right now, and I think you might need it."

Well, who am I to argue with that?

I nod again, and she beckons for me to follow her inside. The darkness of the booth closes over us as Mira crosses to sit down at a table near the back.

“Stones and bones, or cards?” she asks, gesturing to the scrying set and the tarot deck next to her.

“Cards.”

“Good choice. Please, sit.”

The inside of her booth is dim and cozy, lit by a few candles in glass lanterns that cast multicolored light against the tapestries. As I settle across from her and she starts to shuffle, their jewel tones play across the focused expression on her face.

“What would you have said if I chose stones and bones?”

Mira shrugs. “I didn’t think you would. Cards feel right for you tonight.”

A small prickle of awareness builds at the base of my skull as she shuffles and shuffles. A pulse of her magick brushing up against my skin.

“What are we reading about?” she asks, looking up from her cards to catch my eye. “Anything in particular?”

Now that’s a loaded question.

What do I want to know about? My dismal job prospects? My precarious position here? Or maybe I want to know about an irritating demon and a gentle shade, and just what the deal is with both of them.

“A general reading works for me,” I say, and catch the briefest flash of Mira’s smile before she dips her head and continues shuffling.

She murmurs a few words under her breath as her quick, deft hands work the cards. I can’t quite make out what she’s saying, but that whisper of power kicks up again, making all the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

As soon as they do, a card leaps from the deck, landing on the black velvet covered tabletop. It’s followed by another, then a few more, until Mira’s hands still and she takes a deep breath before turning the cards over.

The Tower reversed. Nine of Swords. Two of Swords. Death. The Fool. Three of Cups. The Star.

“Ouch,” I say, looking at the spread.

Mira quirks a brow. “Not happy with what you see?”

I glance at The Tower, Death, and the swords. “Not particularly?”

“There are no bad cards in the deck,” Mira says lightly. “Only helpful

ones. Each with its own sort of medicine to help us on our way.”

We fall silent as she studies them for a few moments more.

She hums softly. “You’ve never told me what brought you to Edgar’s Acres.”

I shrug. “Just needed a change of pace, I guess.”

A wry smile turns up the corners of her lips. “As we all need at times.”

She considers the cards, picking up one, then another, laying them out and moving them around until they seem to make some kind of sense to her.

“You also didn’t mention being involved with anyone.”

The comment catches me off guard. “I’m not.”

“Really? Not even any promising prospects?”

The fact that a haze of shifting shadows and a flash of ruby red eyes crosses my mind at that exact moment means nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“No. Not even any prospects.”

“Then perhaps you just need some time to see what’s in front of you.”

“For my dating life?”

“For whatever journey you’re about to begin,” she says, picking up The Fool and thinking for a few moments. “New beginnings don’t come easy when you’re carrying old baggage.”

“What do you mean by—”

I don’t get to finish my question before the tapestries hanging at the entrance to the booth rustle, and a broad maroon frame darkens the doorway.

“Ren,” Mira says with a smile. “Coming to have your cards read?”

A wide grin spreads across his handsome face, and he shakes his head. “Not today. I’m here to speak with our Rosie.”

I stand from my seat. “Why?”

“Odelia wanted me to—”

“My answer today is the same as it’s always been.”

Renwick braces his legs apart and folds his muscled arms over his chest like he’s preparing for some kind of battle.

Mira’s eyes dart from me to Renwick, then back down to the cards before lighting up with understanding.

What she thinks she understands, I don’t even want to guess.

“I should get going,” I tell her. “Shift starts soon.”

That’s a damn lie. My shift doesn’t start for another half-hour. Renwick must already know that, too, because he lets out a huff of a laugh and leans in to see the cards spread out on the table.

“What’s the hurry, Rosie? Mira’s the best in the business when it comes to tarot. You should stay and see what she has to say.”

“I don’t doubt that at all,” I say through teeth I can barely stop myself from gritting in irritation, then turn to Mira apologetically. “I really do appreciate the reading.”

“Of course,” she says. “Come back any time and we can finish it.”

Renwick lets out a dramatic sigh. “Well, in that case, do you have any cards for me, Mira dear? Since Rosie has to leave us?”

I don’t know exactly what comes over me.

It might be the fresh irritation of having Renwick hovering over my shoulder like my aunt Odelia’s unwanted shadow. Or maybe it’s the fact that I *was* interested in the reading, and now I’m about to scurry out of here like a coward. Whatever it is, all my anger bubbles over and lands squarely on the arrogant, provoking demon standing in front of me.

“You want a card? Here’s your damn card.”

Without thinking, without trying, without actively registering that I’m calling on a power I haven’t touched in years, I reach a hand toward Mira’s tarot deck. A warmth gathers in the center of my chest before shooting down my arm and into my fingertips.

With a soft snick, a card flies across the booth. I grab it easily out of the air before slapping it against Renwick’s chest.

His ruby eyes flare with molten flame as he brings a hand up to rest over mine, and I realize.

I just used magick.

My magick.

His shit-eating grin spreads even wider as he realizes it, too. I draw my hand away, quick and jerky like I’ve been burned, and he snatches the card from where I’d been holding it against his bare skin.

He glances at it and chuckles. “The Devil? I’m flattered, Rosie.”

Mira lets out a startled laugh. “Damn, Rose. Great precision. I didn’t know you were gifted in telekinesis.”

“I’m not,” I mutter, already backing out of the booth.

“This card says otherwise, Rosie,” Renwick taunts.

I don’t say anything. I can’t. Not when my skin is still buzzing and my head is swimming with warmth and static. Magick. Curling its way through my veins and reminding me just what I’ve been denying all these years.

Mira frowns. “Is everything alright? I’m sorry if I—”

“Fine,” I interrupt. “Everything is fine. I just have to... I need to get to work.”

I glance at Renwick, and all the teasing light in his eyes is gone. He’s looking at me with something almost like... concern.

I don’t like it.

I don’t like his concern, and I really don’t like the fact that he’ll absolutely be bringing this information back to Odelia. Odelia, who knows I’ve buried my power completely, refused to acknowledge it, told her straight to her face that under no circumstances do I plan to use it while I’m here.

Goddess damn it anyway.

When I try to leave the booth, Renwick steps into my path.

“Rosemary,” he says cautiously.

I didn’t know those ruby eyes of his could be so kind. They’ve always been dancing with mischief while he’s teasing and taunting me, or lit with pride and arrogance while he’s showing off his ridiculously sculpted physique. But right now they’re soft. Worried. Maybe even a little guilty.

“I’ve got to go,” I say again, and after a couple of heartbeats he moves, leaving the path open for me to take the coward’s way out and make my exit.

3

“Good evening, Rosemary.”

It’s hours later, almost midnight, when Silas's night-wind voice reaches me from just outside the ticket booth. I’m closing tonight, and the last of the guests have already made their way inside the Acres.

“Hey,” I say, looking up from the drawer of cash I’m counting.

“Can I come in?”

I nod, and a moment later all those shadows are hovering beside me.

It’s not as disconcerting as the first few times I interacted with him, but it’s still startling to see the way he can go from one place to the next in the blink of an eye.

Once he’s inside the booth, he settles into the chair in the corner. His shadows configure themselves into something resembling the hazy posture of a man sitting, leaned back with his legs crossed in front of him, and the corners of my mouth quirk up in an unlikely smile.

“Do you need to rest?” I ask, nodding to where he’s sitting. “Does it get tiring, uh, hovering, the way you do?”

A second too late, I realize it might be a rude question to ask. I don’t really know anything about shades, much less what topics they might find inappropriate or taboo.

That worry evaporates when Silas chuckles.

“No, I don’t really need to rest. I mostly do it to make others more comfortable. I know it might be a bit unsettling to have a mass of shadows looming over your shoulder.”

“I don’t mind,” I assure him. “Whatever you prefer.”

A beat of silence before he responds. “Thank you, Rosemary. I appreciate that.”

His shadows unfurl slowly as he comes back to a standing, err *hovering*, position. As they do, I swear I can almost see him. There’s something a little more solid about him tonight. Every time I blink it shifts, and shifts again, but if I look hard enough there might almost be a face there.

Silas must notice how closely I'm watching him, because all his shadows pause as he lets out another soft laugh.

"Better?"

I'm about to apologize for gawking at him when I see it.

A face. Nearly human. Still a little distorted and hard to make out, but the idea is there.

So is the ghost of a smile, and I return it despite my lingering dark mood since the little incident in Mira's booth.

"There you are," I murmur, and the ghost of his smile grows even wider.

I still can't tell exactly what he looks like, and there's no detail in the swirl of his darkness that would let me know the color of his eyes or if the outline of slightly shaggy hair I can make out around the top of his head is blond or brown or black, but it's still him.

"Here I am."

The moment is still and strange, a charge of awareness passing between us. It breaks, though, when Silas shifts again. His features go hazy behind his shadows and he glides over to stand right next to me.

"What are you working on?"

"Nothing important," I tell him with a shrug, going back to emptying the cash drawer. "Just closing things down for the evening."

As soon as I finish sorting and stacking each bundle, it disappears, some enchantment over the booth whisking it away to wherever Odelia keeps her cash.

Silas watches silently as I finish the rest of it, and when I glance up he's still again, that smile of his back on his face.

"And was the rest of your evening pleasant?"

Just like that, the small bubble of a good mood I'd been enjoying pops, and I let out a long, tired sigh.

"Not particularly."

Between the scene with Mira and Renwick, Lara the harpy giving me all kinds of corrections on how I'm doing things in the booth—like taking tickets is *that* complicated—and my growing certainty I'm not going to be able to dodge my aunt and her demands for much longer, I'm not having the best night.

Not that I need to dump all that on Silas. Here he is, being nice to me, just hanging out like he really does want to be my friend. The least I can do is suck it up and stop being such a bummer.

I'm about to say something else, backtrack, put on a happier face, when one of Silas's shadows unfurls toward me. My breath hitches as it curls over my cheek, cups my jaw, whispering over my skin in a gentle caress.

"Your emotions seem turbulent tonight." His shadow falls away and my breathing kicks back up.

"My emotions? You can... sense them?"

It's not entirely unheard of. There are several species of monsters that can boast some sort of psychic or perceptive ability. I just didn't know Silas was one.

"I can," he says warily. "I'm sorry, I should have asked before I—"

"It's alright. I mean, a little unexpected, but fine. Is it a shade thing?"

He lets out a low hum before he replies, thinking. "My kind—shades—we exist through our connection to the beings around us. In some ways it's almost parasitic, I suppose, but the energy coming from you, from all the beings who work here at Edgar's Acres and all the guests who come through, it keeps me tethered in absence of an anchor."

"Tethered? An anchor?"

Silas pauses for a few long, weighted moments, shadows shifting in a way that seems uneasy. "A conversation for another time, I think."

I bite my tongue, but only just barely. My curiosity about him and about what it means to be a shade can wait if it's not something he wants to share.

"Tell me about your day," he prompts, changing the topic. "What has you so unsettled tonight, Rosemary?"

"You sure you really want to hear about my day?"

"I do. And I can probably guess a certain demon has something to do with your mood?"

"Have you talked to Renwick tonight?"

The question slips out before I can stop it. But... damn it anyway. I want to know if the demon's been talking, if he's started telling people about what happened in Mira's tent.

"I haven't. Though I've heard it was quite a show in Lucifer's Parlor this evening. The demon was in fine form."

I have to snort at that. "I'm sure he was."

Silas laughs softly as well. "Ren has a talent for showmanship. You should take the manor tour sometime and see."

I'd rather crunch on a piece of broken glass like a potato chip than go anywhere near that manor, but instead of telling him that, I just shrug and

make a noncommittal noise in the back of my throat. With a final stack sorted, the last of the cash disappears and I turn to lean against the counter, crossing my arms over my chest.

“It bothers you?” Silas asks. “Talking about Ren? Or talking about the manor?”

“More like both?”

The words come out with more of a bite than I meant to put into them, and a ripple of surprise moves through his darkness.

I’m being an ass right now. A cranky ass who has no right to be lashing out at the perfectly nice shade who’s just come to keep me company while I close up.

“Sorry,” I say, a flush of embarrassment climbing up over my cheek.

As soon as it does, one of Silas’s shadows is right there, brushing over the pink of my skin, a wave of gentle magick with it as he feels what I’m feeling.

It surprises me, and it seems to surprise him, too, because all that darkness goes still. When it does, I get another glimpse of his face.

Is he a little clearer this time?

It might just be my mind playing tricks, but when I peer into his shadows, I see a pair of full lips parted on an inhale, the glimmer of wide eyes, the high cut of his cheekbones.

“Don’t be sorry, Rosemary.”

“Rose. You can call me Rose.”

When I whisper the words, I know I’m not imagining the way his shadow presses a little more firmly against my skin. It only lasts for a moment, though, before he pulls away again.

“Rose,” he says. “Well then, don’t be sorry, Rose.”

“I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

“I shouldn’t have pressed on matters that don’t concern me.”

I roll my eyes. “Has anyone ever told you you’re too nice?”

Silas, picking up the thread of teasing in my voice and tugging on it, leans conspiratorially closer. “Yes.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “So then, can we both accept each other’s apologies and move on?”

“I’d like that,” he agrees with a chuckle of his own.

I spend the next twenty minutes going through the rest of my closing tasks—cleaning the booth and getting everything ready for tomorrow—and

keep up a steady stream of conversation with Silas the whole time.

Besides being nicer to me than I probably deserve, it turns out Silas also has a dry, sharp sense of humor. He gives me some insight into the tea this season at Edgar's Acres, providing some surprisingly barbed commentary on a witch who has beef with Howard for breaking her heart last season, and a couple of vampires who had a falling out over a pretty forest nymph they both wanted to mark with their bite.

Feeling a million times more lighthearted by the time I finish up and lock the door behind us as we step outside, I savor the feel of the breeze against my skin. The early October night air is crisp and cool, and I breathe it down deep, tipping my head back to look at the sky.

"A full moon tonight," Silas murmurs.

I hum in agreement. "The next one will be on Samhain. A blue moon."

"Is that so?"

When I glance over, I can't really see him anymore. With the night wrapped around us, his shadows have nearly disappeared into the darkness. It's only the white light of the moon that lets me see the faint outline of him at all. Still, I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Yes, that is so." It's been a habit I've been hard-pressed to break, counting time by moon cycles. I don't know why I still do it, really, other than that it's how my father always marked the passage of the months—not by the calendar, but by the waxing and waning of the moon.

"Should be a wild night," Silas says with an unexpected edge to his voice, dark and teasing. "Samhain always is, but with a full moon? I can only imagine."

A shiver runs down my spine, and not just because of the reminder of Odelia's deadline.

A wild night.

What does that mean, in this place filled with monsters and magick?

"I hope I'm still here for it."

"I hope so, too."

All the dark teasing is gone from his voice, replaced by a plain sincerity and earnestness. An open friendliness I'm not sure what I've done to deserve.

We stay like that for a few more moments, bathed in moonlight with the stars sparkling above. It's a moment of peace. An exhale. Something I didn't know I desperately needed after how I've been feeling the last few days.

But like everything else here, it can't last.

“I should get going,” I say finally, nodding toward the long, sloping hill that leads down toward the staff village.

“Alright. Goodnight, Rose.”

“Goodnight.”

He’s gone in a heartbeat, fading into the deep darkness and leaving me alone once more.

4

My slightly improved mood lasts until I leave my cottage the next evening to head into work and find I have another demon escort.

Renwick is waiting on the postage-stamp sized porch outside my cottage's front door. He's leaning on the banister, and honestly looks ridiculous next to the ornate wooden scrollwork on the eaves, the delicate wrought-iron railing, and the overflowing planter boxes on the windows filled with fall flowers enjoying their last bloom before the frost kicks in.

The whole cottage looks like it belongs in some kind of fairytale, and Renwick is the villain come to wreak havoc in the pretty, enchanted forest.

"What do you want?"

I might have found some patience and maturity talking with Silas last night, but the same doesn't go for the demon. I'm still petty enough to be pissed at him, and all that irritation kicks into high-gear when I see his smirk.

"I was hoping to catch you before your shift."

"Doesn't answer my question." I brush past him down the steps.

He trails along behind me. "About what happened yesterday at Mira's —"

"Just forget about it. It never happened."

Renwick, of course, isn't going to take that for an answer. He's hot on my heels as I head for the path through the woods.

"Gods, Rosemary, will you stop and talk to me for a second?"

"No," I toss over my shoulder, not breaking my stride. "Why would I?"

Renwick just laughs, and the sound is followed a moment later by the weight of a big, warm hand landing on my shoulder.

"Because I want to apologize to you, you frustrating witch."

Shrugging off his hand, I spin around to face him. "For what?"

I absolutely miscalculated the distance between us, because Renwick is there, *right* there, a wall of sculpted muscle and maroon skin. He's tall enough that I have to crane my neck up to look at him.

This close to him, I swear I can feel the heat of his body radiating the

distance between us, and catch the slightest hint of sharp spice in his scent.

I have absolutely no business standing so close—feeling him, *smelling* him—so I take a step back and cross my arms over my chest, waiting for him to answer my question.

“For whatever I did or said that made you react the way you did. I wanted to tease you, Rosie, not actually hurt your feelings.”

It’s a bit of a half-assed apology, but his expression grows softer as he offers it. Sincere.

“It wasn’t... necessarily anything you did,” I say reluctantly.

It really wasn’t. I can take Renwick’s teasing. I can take him trying to strong-arm me into doing what my aunt wants me to do. What I couldn’t take was the magick—my magick—bubbling up to the surface without warning. An instinct I called on without conscious thought. A reminder of just how little control I have over it.

“Then what was it?”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter. But I’ll take your apology if it means you’ll leave me the hell alone.”

“Not a chance, Rosie.”

Rolling my eyes, I turn and start walking away. “Fine. Suit yourself. It’s your own breath you’re wasting.”

“Not a waste, when I know you’ll come around eventually,” he teases, falling into step beside me.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“So,” Renwick continues as we start up the long hill toward the Acres. “If it wasn’t me being my charming self that upset you, and you won’t tell me what did, is there anything else I can—”

“Rosemary.”

The bottom falls out of my stomach as I turn and see the witch standing in the middle of the path behind us. The very last person I want to talk to right now.

“Odelia,” I say, trying my best not to grimace as I face her. “What’s up?”

Odelia looks me up and down. “It would seem you’ve been exercising your magick.”

I whirl around to face Renwick, staring daggers at him. “You told her?”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “I didn’t, Rosie, I swear. I—”

“He didn’t tell me,” Odelia cuts in. “You think with as many wards and

enchantments as I have cast over this place, I wouldn't be able to feel a new strain of Bramwell magick pop up? Especially one I know so well?"

Of course she could feel it. Of course she could feel my father's magick, her brother's magick.

"It wasn't on purpose," I mutter, staring down at the carpet of fallen leaves beneath my feet. "And not something I plan on repeating."

Renwick makes a soft, distressed noise in the back of his throat. "That's what had you so upset? Using your magick?"

I'm absolutely, unequivocally not going to answer that question. When I glance back up and see his red eyes narrowed and face creased in obvious concern, my stomach clenches.

Before I have the chance to say anything, Odelia cuts back in, jerking her chin toward the manor. "Ren, go make yourself useful helping Margot set up the Demonic Dining Experience for this evening. She could use an extra set of hands."

He nods, but gives me one last look of sympathy and understanding before he goes.

I hate it.

Being exposed like this. Made to feel vulnerable. Having the one thing I've done my damndest to bury and ignore dragged to light and put on display for others to pick at.

"Let's go to my office," Odelia says, already walking away without waiting for my answer.

"I have to get to my shift with—"

"You can be a few minutes late tonight, I've got it covered. Come on."

With the matter apparently settled, she stalks off. I'm left standing there, stewing in all my irritation and embarrassment, knowing I have no choice but to follow.

Not that I have to be happy about it. No, as I trail behind her to a small building set off to the side of the manor where the Edgar's Acres admin staff works, I let all those emotions simmer and build. Enough so that by the time we reach her office and take seats on opposite sides of her wide wooden desk, I've worked myself into a brittle, righteous indignation.

"I meant what I said about not touching my magick," I say as soon as we're seated.

Odelia arches a brow. She looks so much like my father that it knocks the air from me at times. The same big, expressive features, the same dark

eyes. At one time they even had the same dark brown hair, but hers is nearly all gray now.

I wonder if my father's would be, too, if he were still alive.

"And yet," Odelia drawls, snapping me out of those thoughts. "Your incident in the market last night would suggest otherwise."

"It was an accident."

"An accident? Like the one that cost you your last job?"

I breathe slowly through my nose, trying to keep my anger in check. "No. Not like the one that lost me my last job. I moved a tarot card, not—"

"Set a building on fire?"

"I did not set a building on fire. I set a *filing cabinet* on fire. And that was only because—"

"The reason is irrelevant, Rosemary." The chill in Odelia's tone cuts through the argument I was trying to make. "That you have so little control over your magick is not a matter to take lightly."

"I've got a handle on it," I say through my teeth.

"I highly doubt that. Almost as much as I doubt the wisdom of letting a loose cannon witch continue working here without training to prevent any more *accidents*. Seems like a liability, doesn't it?"

"I've already told you I don't have any interest in training my magick."

"So you've said. And with all of that in mind, why shouldn't I just ask you to leave now?"

Her words slither uncomfortably down my spine and take up residence like a greasy residue in the bottom of my stomach.

She's not wrong.

I know I'm being a choosy beggar when I truly have no right to be. I'm half-expecting the next words out of her mouth to be a curt dismissal and an order to pack my shit and get out, when she lets out a long, disappointed sigh.

"Why does it bother you so much? The idea of accessing your magick? Learning to control it?"

She knows why. Or at least she should.

How does she expect me to feel, given the fact I spent nearly all my childhood, adolescence and early adulthood away from magick?

"It's just not something I have any interest in exploring."

That apparently wasn't the answer Odelia wanted to hear. Her eyes narrow and her frown deepens.

"Your father would want you to at least try."

If my stomach felt greasy before, it's downright painful now, roiling with guilt and indignation. Manipulative witch.

"That's not fair."

My words are barely louder than a whisper, but they put a flash of hard resolve on Odelia's face.

"I know it's not fair, Rosemary, but that doesn't make it any less true." She stands from her desk and comes out from behind it to stand right in front of me.

I stand as well, uncertain what she means to do and not about to take whatever it is sitting down. She raises her hands and rests them on my shoulders.

"Your mother really did a number on you, didn't she?"

"Don't talk about my mother."

She doesn't even flinch at the venom in my voice. "Why not? You came here instead of going home to her. Why is that?"

"None of your damned business."

I shake off her hands and take a few steps away, breathing deep and trying to calm myself down.

"It is my *damned business* when I'm giving you a paycheck and a place to live, Rosemary. It is my damned business when I extended an offer of help, when you refuse to acknowledge or train your magick, and then you have an unintended flare in the middle of the night market. What if it had been flames, instead of telekinesis?"

Again, she's not wrong, but I'm feeling too defensive right now to think straight. My head swims and my fingertips tingle with the flames she just mentioned.

I'm losing it, and I need to get the hell out of this conversation and out of this office.

"So, what?" I finally ask. "I either get on board with training my magick and being a part of your haunted house, or I'm out of here?"

"Part of my haunted house?" she asks derisively. "Please, Rosemary. You don't really think that's all we do here, do you? Edgar's Acres might be the part of our family's legacy that's visible to non-magick folk, but it doesn't even scratch the surface of the community we have the privilege of stewarding."

I'm only vaguely aware of what she means. Before my father died, I was too young to understand most of it, and my mother never talked about it at

all.

But I'll be damned if I let her know that.

"There's a whole shadow *world*, of which we are stewards," Odelia says—patiently, like she's talking to a stubborn child. "Entire communities hidden by wards and glamours, monsters doing their best to remain unnoticed while walking amongst humans. We all work together to stay protected and to ensure all members of those communities are cared for."

The words stir memories of my father's voice, of stories he used to tell me about a world I'd be a part of one day. When I was older. When I didn't live under my mother's roof anymore.

I blink away those memories and the sting of tears behind my eyes.

"That's the world your mother denied you after James died," Odelia continues, voice softer now. "That's the world I'm inviting you to be a part of. You could have gone anywhere else, Rosemary, but you chose here. And I think you know there's a reason for that."

An uncomfortable sense of shame settles over me. I want to cling on to my stubbornness and indignation. I want to be *right*, for all the hurt and reluctance I've been clinging onto to have been justified. But as much as I try to summon all those feelings and wrap them around me like a protective cloak, I can't seem to grasp a single one.

"So, I'll ask you again. What will it be?"

And just like that, the path of my life branches out before me. Something in Odelia's resolve tells me this isn't an offer she's going to extend again.

Which... as much as I want to fault her for that—I mean, come on, I'm the black sheep just coming home after fifteen years, and she expects me to have it figured out after a few short weeks?—I can understand where she's coming from.

She has responsibilities I can't even fathom, concerns that go well beyond one wayward niece who's been running away from her magick for years.

As much as I still want to refuse, as much as I still want to rail against her for what a hard-ass she's being right now, I... can't.

Because that small, childish part of me that still misses my father and still remembers the way his eyes would sparkle when he told me about his magickal world feels like it's been kicked in the chest.

But can I do this? Can I really face what it would mean to not only

accept my magick, but hone it?

I'm speaking before I've even fully realized I've decided.

"Fine. I'll do it. I'll train."

For one unexpected moment, there's something like tenderness in Odelia's eyes. With how absolutely battered I'm feeling from this conversation, I would have expected triumph, maybe some kind of vicious satisfaction for having strong-armed her way into getting what she wanted.

None of that is there, though, and in those few moments of truce, I see my father looking at me through her dark eyes.

"Alright then," Odelia says, all business again. "Telekinesis. And fire-wielding? You agree to train them both?"

"Yes." The word is an effort, but I force it out.

"And alchemy? Did James pass that down to you?"

My heart leaps into my throat, and my palms go clammy. "I don't know."

Fuck, I hate the hitch in my voice, just as much as I hate the flash of concern that crosses Odelia's face.

"Rosemary. Forgive me, I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine."

It's not fine. But what am I supposed to do? Have a damn heart-to-heart with her over a piece of magick I can barely think about, let alone try to access?

Alchemy was my father's power.

Telekinesis and fire are all my own, passed down from some distant Bramwell ancestor, but alchemy? That was all his.

Before he died, my father's workshop used to be my favorite place in the world. He'd been so patient with me when I asked about his work, so eager to share that part of his life. Though I'd been too young to test out my own magick and see if I had any talents in transfiguration and transmutation, I always hoped I would.

Alchemy was going to be *ours*.

I'd been so certain of it as a child. Whenever he dropped me off with my mother, back at the house where magick was taboo and she didn't want to see a single trace of it under her roof, I'd held onto that belief.

I was going to be a great alchemist, just like him. He'd teach me everything he knew, and I'd go live with him full time as soon as I was old enough to choose.

Until one rainy autumn night, when the phone had rang at half-past ten.

I'd still been awake, curled under my covers reading through one of the thick, dusty alchemy tomes my father had given me on my last visit. I barely understood any of it, and my eyes were droopy when I heard the shrill ring of the handset in the kitchen.

When I'd crept to the top of the stairs and heard half the conversation my mother was having with Odelia, I didn't know what to make of it. I didn't know anything except that there was a pit opening up in the bottom of my stomach, and when my mother hung up and came around the corner, she'd had a horrible expression on her face. Some combination of guilt and pain, and just the slightest edge of... relief.

A car accident. A bend in the road and a drunk driver in the wrong lane. Instantaneous. Catastrophic.

That had been it. No more magick, no more visits from Odelia or any of my other Bramwell family.

I spent the next fifteen years living with the unspoken understanding my magick was something to hide, something to control. My mother didn't want to hear about it, didn't want to entertain it for a moment. The older I got, the more I came to understand that just because she'd gotten pregnant during a short-lived relationship with a man who's true nature as a witch she didn't know at the time, it didn't mean she'd ever come to accept her own daughter had inherited that nature.

And when all of that magick reared its ugly head and caused me to lose my job, my way of supporting myself?

I couldn't go back.

The idea of it made me sick.

I'd have done just about anything to avoid turning back to my mother for support, and I guess that now includes agreeing to Odelia's terms, no matter how much it still terrifies me.

"Fire magick," I say, pushing all those throat-clenching memories aside. "And telekinesis. I can work on training those."

Odelia stares at me for a few more moments, considering, before she nods. "Excellent. You'll start tomorrow. I'll let Renwick know."

"Why Renwick?" I can't help but ask.

"Why not Renwick? He's been with Edgar's Acres for five years now, and he's got a few powers of his own that might surprise you. Not to mention, the demon is exceptionally durable if you have any more..."

accidents.”

I try not to roll my eyes at that.

“Unless there’s another reason you’d rather not train with him? I’ve noticed the two of you haven’t exactly hit it off, but if he’s crossed any lines, or if he’s—”

“No,” I say quickly, feeling the unexpected need to defend the irritating demon. “He hasn’t done anything but annoy the shit out of me.”

Odelia cracks a thin smile. “He can be somewhat of an acquired taste.”

I certainly don’t have any plans to acquire a taste for him, but I don’t say that. “Tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow,” Odelia agrees.

I nod and take a step toward the door.

“Rosemary,” she says, stopping me. “None of this is set in stone. You’re not a prisoner here. And you’re free to leave if you decide it’s not something you can handle.”

The words prickle against my skin. They’re not offered as a challenge, but they certainly feel like one.

I’m free to give up whenever I want. Free to fold. Free to scurry away back to the mundane world.

And... fuck. A part of me still wants to. The scared, vulnerable, panicked part of me that recoils every time I feel my magick brewing beneath my skin wants nothing more than to run away from it all.

But where would I go? Is there anywhere else left for me?

All those doubts and worries ricochet around my mind, and I know I’m not going to have any answers for them tonight.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, and Odelia looks pleased enough with that response.

“We’ll give it until Samhain. Train with Renwick. Get control of your magick. Decide if this world is for you, Rosemary.”

5

Although I did, indeed, agree to Odelia's terms, I'm sure as hell not happy about it as I clock in for my shift in the ticket booth. I'm not happy about it while I'm taking money and issuing wristbands all evening, and I'm not happy when Lara leaves for the night and I'm left to close up alone.

I'm still brooding over it when the gates close for last admission. Though we don't let anyone in after eleven, the guests still inside will filter out for the next hour or two. It's my job to close the booth and shoo away stragglers or answer questions if anyone stops by.

The moon is beginning to wane, but is still plenty high and bright in the sky as I step out of the booth and pull the black plastic trash bag out of the can at the side of the building. I run it down to the dumpster and am just back in sight of the booth when I hear a voice call out from behind me.

"Hey there darlin'."

Fighting back a shudder at the drunken, disgustingly sexual slur in his tone, I turn to find one of this evening's guests wobbling toward me.

I recognize him from earlier. He was trying to flirt with Lara while she was counting out his change, and gave me a lecherous wink before he headed into the Acres with the rest of his party. He didn't seem intoxicated then, but by the way he's stumbling now it's clear he made more than a couple stops at the mead booth over the last few hours.

"Can I help you?" I ask, not bothering to hide the irritated edge in my voice.

The man grins. "Well hey there, sad eyes. Why don't you give me a smile?"

Fucking creep. Why do men like this always have some sort of sick sixth sense for singling out a woman who's feeling down on herself?

"Do you have a ride home?" I ask, ignoring his question. "Or do I need to take your keys?"

"Gotta ride," he slurs. "But they're still in the manor. Wanted to talk to you."

“I’m busy.”

Edgar’s Acres hospitality be damned. I am absolutely not about to entertain this asshole.

Turning to head back toward the booth, I only make it a few steps before a warm, sweaty hand closes around my wrist.

Damn, this drunk is quick.

“Get your hand off me.”

Snapping my arm out of his grasp, I whirl around and come almost face-to-face with him. He’s about my height, with a stocky build, blond hair, and a round face that really needs a shave. His eyes are watery and red-rimmed, and he’s scowling at me now, all his inebriated good humor disappearing in an instant.

“Don’t hafta be such a bitch,” he says, stepping even closer. “I’m just tryna’ talk.”

“And I have no interest in talking to you. You need to leave.”

Yeah, did I really expect that to do anything? The man grunts unhappily, sways toward me, and lifts his hand like he’s going to touch me again.

Without thinking, I put both my hands on his shoulders and shove.

But it turns out the drunk is a lot more sturdy and steadier on his feet than he looks, because even though I give him a small shove back, what I mostly manage to do is throw myself off balance.

As I stumble back, I run into... something. More solid than air, but not solid enough to keep me from wobbling a few more steps before I catch myself just as I’m about to go sprawling into the dew-damp grass.

“I’m here.”

Silas’s voice is little more than a breath of wind in the night, low and reassuring. As if to prove he’s real, he curls his darkness around me in a ghostly embrace. When he speaks again, his voice is even lower, more urgent, tinged with worry.

“Do you want some help getting rid of this idiot?”

“Uh, yeah,” I mutter, a little breathless at the feel of his magick surrounding me. “That would be great.”

“Then use my shadows, Rosemary. Make them your own.”

I’m confused by what he means, until I feel the brush of those shadows sliding over my shoulders, down my arms, caressing my wrists and hands. Like a living thing, they encircle me completely, and my breath catches in my throat when I feel the thrum of his power growing stronger against my skin.

I look back up at the drunken guest and his eyes are wide, darting back and forth, up and down, as his sluggish, mead-soaked brain tries to make sense of what he's seeing.

"How... what're you..." He can't quite form a full sentence as he stares at me and sputters.

"You feel my power, yes? Make it yours." Silas's darkness continues to spread, whispering along my skin and down my limbs as he hums in warm satisfaction. "Just like that, Rosemary."

Suddenly I'm the one cloaked in darkness.

It fills me with a wicked sense of delight, a buzzing, humming magick that envelopes me and feels as natural as breathing. From within, my own magick stirs to life. Slight, tentative, drifting up to my palms and the center of my chest.

"Let him see what happens to a man who dares meddle with a witch like you."

The low taunt is so unlike the Silas I know that I nearly laugh out loud in surprise. And, like he can feel that laughter bubbling up in my throat, he pulls his shadows in tighter, reminding me to focus.

Focus, yes, I can focus.

Power sparks along all my nerve endings, some strange melding of me and Silas that feels like embers and moonlight against my skin. When I breathe in, I can taste it. Fallen leaves and the first hard frost, a faint hint of smoke and the crispness of an autumn morning.

"I gave you a warning," I tell the man, raising my arms and sensing the darkness move with me. "You should have listened."

He takes a shaking step back, face sheet-white and watery eyes wild. "Wh-what are you?"

"A nightmare," I say with a cruel grin. "Your nightmare."

With a flick of my wrist, a tendril of shadow snaps out toward him and whips against his cheek. I'm sure it barely stung, but he slaps a hand to cover the spot on his face and takes a few more steps away from me.

From somewhere behind me—or maybe *within* me, it's honestly hard to tell right now—the familiar rumble of Silas's chuckle makes my grin widen.

"I think it's time for you to leave," I tell the man. "Unless you'd like to find out what happens when nightmares like me catch up with men like you."

He sputters a few more times, but can't come up with any kind of coherent answer as he continues staring at me in terror and disbelief.

I wonder what kind of sight I must make. Grinning, vengeful, darkness incarnate.

Goddess, this is fun.

“Wonderful, darling,” Silas croons, and the note of pure, sinful pleasure in his voice sends a thread of dark delight through me.

I let all that darkness gather, pull it back to me in great, pulsing waves. Looming, threatening, wicked.

The man’s trembling grows more violent, and he finally takes a step back. Then another. And another. Until he’s tripping over his own feet and stumbling off down the hill toward the parking lot.

“Good riddance, asshole,” I mutter as he goes.

I’m still cloaked in Silas’s shadows, and when another rumble of soft laughter breaks from his throat, I feel it all the way through me.

With the drunk taken care of, I expect Silas to pull back, to disentangle himself from me and leave me ordinary and human once more. Not a fearsome thing, not a creature of darkness.

But he doesn’t.

No, as the silent seconds pass, those shadows stay right where they are. Still holding me, still caressing softly, as if the feeling of being bound like this is as novel for him as it is for me.

“You were magnificent,” he says, though I’m not sure if the words are spoken aloud, or if they just flow between us as naturally as his darkness does.

“I think you get most of the credit,” I whisper, raising a hand and giving another experimental flick of my wrist, watching the darkness shoot out and retract at my command. “This is pretty fucking cool.”

Another chuckle, and his shadows gather close. “How does it feel? Wielding them?”

“It feels...” I start, then trail off, trying to find the right word for the magick still skittering along my skin, the midnight embers humming through my blood. “Powerful. Like *I’m* powerful.”

“You are powerful, darling.”

For a few long moments, every one of my retorts and all the thoughts in my head go strangely silent.

There’s nothing left but me and Silas. The darkness of him and the hush of the evening air. The steady pulse of magick between us.

It’s... incredible, this feeling. Enough to lose myself in. Not in fear this

time, but wonder. Instead of pulling on all my terror and worry, his magick soothes. It cloaks me in protective darkness, draws me close and expands me all at once. I might be infinite in this magick.

Well, at least until the laughter from a nearby group of guests shakes me out of my trance and back into reality.

Silas must hear it too, because he pulls away. Like water swirling down a bathtub's drain, the sensation of the magick leaving me is slippery, insistent, sucking the air from my lungs as it goes.

I stagger a little when the last of the shadows leave me, gasping in a desperate breath.

“Rosemary?”

I open my mouth to answer, but my head spins and my vision swims.

“Woah,” I mutter, wobbling as I struggle to regain my balance.

Silas's shadows encircle me again, and he lets out a low, harsh curse, but there's nothing he can do as my knees give out and the ground rushes up to meet me.

6

“Rosemary,” Silas says in a clipped, worried voice, his shadowed form crouching down where I’m on my hands and knees in the grass.

Magick drain is a bitch.

I’ve only experienced it once before, right after *The Incident*.

I’d been useless then, too. Exhausted, unable to defend myself or explain away the burning file cabinet in the corner of my office.

Murphy, my asshole of a boss, had been positively fucking gleeful during the whole thing. Saving the day with a fire extinguisher. Directing the firefighters when they’d arrived. Pinning the whole mess squarely on me and barely containing his delight when the police officer showed up to speak to me.

What he didn’t say a damned word about?

Murphy didn’t say a damned word about the fact that he’d asked me out not even an hour beforehand, and I’d turned him down. He didn’t mention he’d taken it like an entitled fucking child, disappearing into his office for a few minutes of slamming desk drawers and muffled cursing before stepping back out with a sharp grin on his face. He conveniently forgot he’d told me I needed to work late that night, and that I needed to be in the office that weekend, delivering the news with cruel satisfaction.

I knew exactly what that meant, what kind of retribution I could expect for simply saying ‘no’.

And it wasn’t until after—after the file cabinet was smoldering and my whole body felt drained—that the horror of what I’d unintentionally done washed over me.

“Rosemary.”

Silas’s voice is garbled, like I’m hearing it from underwater.

I blink, and blink again, until the tangled grass beneath me comes into focus, and I can feel cool night air rasping in and out of my lungs.

Unlike when I burned out after reacting to Murphy’s cruelty, however, now I feel...

Incredible. Exhausted, yes, depleted and breathless, but also so fucking satisfied I got to put that drunk creep in his place.

“Rosemary.”

“Rose,” I murmur. “Remember? It’s alright if you want to call me Rose.”

Silas lets out a shaky breath that might be a laugh, but mostly just sounds like concern. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

His shadows are still worrying around me. Brushing against my arms and face, sweeping my hair back and away from my sweaty, clammy neck.

Wait... sweeping my hair away from my neck?

Startled, I crane my head around to see that darkness of his actually *moving* my hair. Like phantom fingers in the night.

Silas doesn’t even seem to be aware he’s doing it.

“Um,” I say, glancing pointedly at the shadow, then up at him. “Are they usually able to do that?”

As soon as I ask, the shadows pull away and my hair falls softly against my neck.

“I... no, they aren’t.”

I can’t read his tone, and don’t have the mental capacity to think about what that means as I concentrate on breathing and blinking away the rest of the blur from my eyes.

Silas keeps his shadows to himself, but stays crouched near me as I pull myself back together. There’s an unspoken question in the air, but he waits for me to speak instead of asking it.

“Magick drain,” I say a couple of minutes later, rocking back so I’m kneeling in the grass.

Silas curses under his breath. “I’m sorry, Rose. That was thoughtless of me. I should have never—”

“Are you kidding?” I push up onto my feet. It makes me go a bit woozy again, and I brace my hands on my knees while I breathe through it. “That was so fucking cool.”

He doesn’t seem to agree as a low, unhappy noise rumbles in his chest, but tough. It *was* fucking cool. Feeling his magick like that. Feeling *mine* rush up to meet it. I’m about to tell him that when I glance up and the words die in my throat.

Silas is... there. Still not quite solid, but much more substantial than I’ve ever seen him.

“I can see you,” I say, incredulous, as my greedy eyes take him in.

His body is more defined now. Tall and sleek, not so big and burly as Renwick, but with wide shoulders and an athletic build. His face, too, shines more clearly from his shadows than ever before. The firm set of his jaw and the cut of high cheekbones. A dim silvery glow from eyes watching me with surprise and concern.

Silas is handsome.

I don’t really know why I’m surprised. He’s always been attractive—his kindness, his protectiveness, the darkness of him—but getting a better look at him now startles me.

It seems to startle him, too, as he glances down at himself.

“That’s... new.”

I keep studying him as I straighten the rest of the way, my spinning head finally clearing enough for me to be upright.

“Good new, or bad new?”

He considers for a few more moments, turning this way and that to take in as much of himself as he can.

“Good, I think.”

“You think?” I tease.

Silas shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter right now. I’m more concerned about you.”

“Magick drain’s no big deal,” I say with a shrug, as though this is something that happens to me all the time. “I’ll be fine in a couple of minutes.”

Silas isn’t buying it. He folds his arms over his chest and tilts his head at me.

“You’re lying.”

“It’s nothing to be concerned about, Silas.” It’s not even a lie this time. With each passing minute, the drain is fading and I’m feeling better.

“Fine,” he relents with a sigh. “Can I at least walk you home? To make sure you get there alright?”

“Sure. I’ve got a couple more closing tasks to take care of, but I should be good to go after that.”

“I’ll have Odelia send someone later,” he protests. “You should get home and rest.”

“Unnecessary.” I toss him a careless smile over my shoulder as I head back into the booth. “I’m fine.”

And truthfully, I am. Maybe I should be a little more freaked out about using magick twice in one week, but this is *his* magick, after all, not mine. It doesn't leave me feeling nearly as unsettled as my little slip with the tarot card did.

In fact, it leaves me feeling pretty incredible. The echoes of his dark, pulsing energy, of all that skittering, static magick are still making me feel so damn alive and giddy.

It's wild, his power, untamed and unlike anything I've ever felt. *Silas* is unlike anyone I've ever met. The delicious contrast of having him worrying over my shoulder like a knight in shadowed armor while his magick still lingers on my skin makes me feel even more safe and protected.

Even if I wish he wouldn't worry so much.

"Rosemary—"

"Rose!" I remind him cheerfully, starting on the register.

Silas sighs. "Alright, Rose, I'll stay until you're done."

The next fifteen minutes pass uneventfully as I get everything squared away for the evening. When I'm finished up, I lock the booth behind me and find Silas waiting in a shadow just outside the door.

He's been quiet as he waits, and when he sees me walking toward him he moves immediately, a tendril of darkness reaching out to stroke my shoulder.

"Ready," I say with a smile. "And I've been staying in one of the cottages down the hill, so it's not too far to walk."

Silas nods, and we head off into the night. Still, as we go his darkness seems unsettled, swirling and agitated, like it's picking up on his own turbulent mood.

"Out with it," I say with a dramatic, long-suffering sigh. "Whatever you're still worried about."

He cuts me a look, then shakes his head. "I'm not... worried. Just sorry. I should have thought before I did what I did back there."

"And what *was* that?" I ask, no hint of accusation in my voice. "You can share your shadows?"

He's silent for a few moments before he answers. "It's something my magick allows me to do. Form bonds and create an energy flow of sorts. A way to pass power to another being."

"Is that how you travel so easily between one place and another? Energy flows, and all that?"

“Yes, that’s right. Though, my abilities would be stronger if I were tethered to an anchor and—”

His words cut off abruptly, and he makes a low, disgruntled noise in the back of his throat, like he just thought better of whatever it is he was about to say.

It’s clear he’s not going to elaborate, and I almost don’t push him on it.

As we continue down the hill and through the woods toward the cottages, the night presses in close between us. It might be better to bite my tongue, to not ask for answers that will pull me deeper into him, to this place, to the magick I’m still not sure I want any part of. But when one of his shadows whispers against the back of my hand, sparking a bit of that same dark power we shared earlier, I decide to throw those reservations to the wind.

“An anchor?” I ask. “You mentioned it the other night, but didn’t explain what it is.”

Silas nods slowly and takes a deep breath. “My kind craves connection more than anything. It’s intrinsic to our nature. An anchor is a strong attachment we form that tethers us to the world. And with that tether comes a symbiosis of sorts, a channel of connection that ties a shade to their anchor in a very deep and profound way.”

“And it would make you more powerful? In what way?”

“That I don’t know. It depends on the nature of the connection, and on the magick of the shade and anchor themselves.”

I hum low in my throat, considering that. “Well, that sounds a hell of a lot cooler than my magick. All I can do is move stuff and set things on fire.”

“Really? Telekinesis and fire-wielding are no meager gifts, Rose.”

The way he says it, with a note of quiet awe in his voice, makes my throat tighten unexpectedly. I cough away the sensation.

“Yeah, I mean, they would be. If I had any kind of control over them.”

It’s more than I meant to say, and I fight a flinch as Silas looks sharply over at me.

“Is that why Odelia wants you to work with Ren?”

“It is,” I admit, deciding I owe him some honesty in exchange for what he’s given me. “And why I agreed to it.”

As we approach my cottage, I tell him. About what happened in the market with Renwick. About my conversation with Odelia. I keep some parts to myself—all the gnarliest bits about my family and my background—but by

the time I've finished we're standing on my little front porch, just beneath the flickering light next to the door I've been meaning to fix.

"So you're working with Ren now," Silas murmurs.

"I am." I try to read his reaction and come up short.

Silas's expression is inscrutable as he peers down at me. When his shadowed hand reaches out for mine, I instinctively try to close my own around it. All I manage to do is sink through him, and as we both stare down at where his darkness meets my skin, he lets out a short huff of breath.

"Does it bother you?" I ask before I can think better of it, voice barely above a whisper. "Not being able to... touch?"

"If you'd asked me a month ago, I would have said no," he says wryly, every bit as quiet as I am.

Silence falls between us, but we stay right where we are.

The hush of the October night presses in close—the faint breath of wind through the trees and the soft glimmer of the stars above. The moment is woven through with more of his tempting magick, full to the brim with a hundred questions I want to ask him.

"You'll be alright with Ren?" Silas asks before I can form any of those questions into actual words. "I know the two of you haven't exactly gotten on well since you arrived."

I laugh, the spell between us dissipating. "I can handle the demon."

"I have no doubt you can," he says with a chuckle, then sobers. "But you'll... let me know? If you need help with him? Or... anything?"

Will I? The fact that Silas would even want to know if I needed help makes a little bubble of warmth rise in the center of my chest.

"Sure. I'll let you know."

He seems to accept that as he takes a step back, shadows melding into the surrounding darkness.

"Please do. Anything you need, Rosemary, I'll be here."

And then he's gone, slipping away with the autumn wind.

A heavy weight settles itself into the bottom of my stomach as I get ready for my first training session with Renwick.

It's noon, hours before I'd usually have to be at work, but Odelia's not about to part with one of her star performers for tonight, so Renwick and I are both pulling double duty today.

Leaving my cottage and heading through the woods toward the Acres, I wonder what the demon is getting out of this.

He's been all arrogance and teasing and totally on board with training me, but... why? What's it to him?

I toss that thought on top of the heap of unanswered questions in the back of my mind as I continue on.

Questions aside, it's a banner fall day. Sunny and warm, the kind of day that feels so damn precious knowing winter's right around the corner. Most of the trees around the Acres are fully turned, making the walk through the woods like stepping into a kaleidoscope of reds and yellows and oranges, and it's enough to boost my mood a little as I head over to meet Renwick.

It's not quite enough to erase my worries over what 'training' will actually entail, especially when my magick still feels so close to the surface after what I shared with Silas last night. Those moments of connection, the way it felt to give into his power, *our* power...

I'm still lost in those thoughts when I make it just outside the gates and spot a broad, shirtless, maroon demon standing under a tree.

And he's not alone.

It's strange to see Silas out in the daytime, and although he and Renwick are talking under the shade of a wide oak tree, the gathered darkness of him is unmistakable.

The two of them are deep in conversation, so engaged they don't notice me approaching, and as I get closer I can start to make out the expressions on their faces.

Well, on Renwick's at least, but something in the stiff set of Silas's

posture lets me get a pretty good read on him as well.

Tense. Confrontational. Renwick runs a hand over one of his horns in apparent frustration before saying something to Silas. I'm still too far away to hear their words, but it doesn't take a genius to see the conversation isn't exactly a friendly one.

I'm only a handful of yards away when Renwick spots me, and his face immediately melts from all of that tension into the provoking grin I already know so well.

"Hey Rosie," he says in greeting, though it sounds a bit like a threat in that sharp, teasing tone of his.

"Hello Rose," Silas says, much softer, and with a thread of that same concern he had last night.

"Hi," I say, joining them under the oak's shade.

I catch Silas's shadowed gaze and feel a pulse of his magick against my skin. It gets stronger when a tendril of his darkness reaches out to brush my arm. My eyes dart to Renwick, and his grin slips a little as he watches the silent exchange.

"How are you feeling?" Silas asks.

"I'm fine," I say, still looking at Renwick, wondering how much Silas shared about exactly what went down last night.

Renwick clears his throat. "Silas tells me you had an issue with magick drain."

Silas flinches, then turns to glare at him. "I told you that in confidence. Not so you could throw it back in her face and—"

"It's fine," I say. "I mean, he is going to be training me, so he should know what he's getting into."

Renwick looks pleased with that answer, but furrows of concern spring up on Silas's shadowed forehead.

"Are you sure? If this isn't something you want, I can speak with Odelia and—"

"It's what I want," I say, wincing a little at interrupting him again, but certain about this, at least.

"You hear that, Sy?" Renwick cuts in. "It's what she wants. No need to step in and decide for her. Rosie here is tougher than she looks."

It's my turn to glare at Renwick. "Oh shut it. He's just looking out for me. Which, you know, is kind of nice to have at least one person around here who is."

That shuts Renwick up and has Silas reaching out another shadow to caress along my arm. Renwick's eyes track the movement, darting back and forth between the two of us. Silas either doesn't notice or doesn't care as he leans in close and murmurs near my ear.

"I don't doubt you for a moment, darling," he says, and a pulse of his dark power shoots up my spine, making me shiver. "Forgive me for overstepping?"

"Nothing to forgive," I whisper, and he draws back before turning to Renwick.

"Behave yourself? I should know better than to ask, but there's no need to be so... well, to be so *you*."

Renwick grins and puffs out his chest. "You're right, there's no use asking."

With a long-suffering sigh, Silas begins to fade out. "I'll see you later tonight, Rose?"

"Sure. You know where to find me."

One last brush of darkness and Silas disappears, melting into the tree's shadows between one heartbeat and the next.

It leaves Renwick and me alone, and when I sneak a glance at him he's staring at the spot where Silas just faded, some unreadable expression on his face. I might almost call it regret, or maybe shame, if I thought the demon was capable of those emotions.

He recovers a moment later when he catches me looking, arrogant grin returning.

"Alright then," he says, clapping his hands together. "You're with me, Rosie."

Again, it sounds more like a threat than an invitation. Without waiting for me to accept it or answer, he stalks off toward the gates.

"Where are we going?" I ask, trailing behind him.

"Somewhere all that fire of yours can't do any damage."

His strides are so long and purposeful I practically have to jog to keep up, irritation growing with each step I take.

"Yeah, I'm going to need a little bit more than that."

"Patience, Rosie."

I bite my tongue and hold back any more arguments. I agreed to this, and if playing by Odelia's rules and going along with this whole training thing is going to buy me some more time here, I can stop being such a whiner

about it.

“So,” Renwick says, changing the topic. “You and Silas, huh?”

He sounds casual about it, *too* casual, and when I catch up to him and cut him a look, some of that same tension from earlier has crept back into his expression.

Ah. It would seem the demon isn’t so infallible.

Peevishly, I decide to poke that weak spot in his arrogant armor a bit more.

“What about it surprises you?” I ask, just as casual as he is. “Silas is great.”

He doesn’t answer right away, but his smirk slips another notch.

“Unless there’s another reason it bothers you?” I ask, digging in a little harder. “Something that doesn’t have to do with Silas at all?”

“I don’t have any idea what you mean.”

“Don’t you? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were jealous.”

Renwick stops dead in his tracks, rounding on me.

“Would you?” he asks, low and dark, leaning over me and taking full advantage of his height and bulk.

“Yes,” I say, trying to hold my own even while my breath stutters in my chest.

He’s just so *big*. Tall and broad and muscled. Warm. When he gets close to me like this, there’s no denying it.

The demon is sexy as hell, and I’m not immune.

“I don’t believe in jealousy, Rosie.”

I scoff at that, ready to call him on his bullshit. Who doesn’t believe in jealousy? Like it’s a thing he can just pretend doesn’t exist? Only, before I can get the words out, he leans in even closer to murmur into my ear.

“Not when sharing is so much more fun.”

With that, he turns and continues walking like nothing happened, leaving me to blink after him.

Now what the *hell* does he mean by that?

“Keep up, Rosie,” he tosses back over his shoulder, and I curse under my breath as I jog to catch back up to him.

Our conversation has lasted us through the gates and deep into the grounds. And, as it turns out, we’re not headed into the manor. We walk around to the back side, reaching a set of stairs headed down into a...

“Nope,” I say, stubbornly planting my feet and refusing to follow. “I’m

not letting you take me down into some murder basement.”

“No bodies down here,” he says cheerfully, descending the stairs and throwing open the door. “Just a whole lot of stone and earth you won’t be able to set on fire no matter what kind of blaze you summon.”

When he disappears inside, I stay right where I am. No way in hell am I following him down into that darkness, into some creepy, dank—

“Or you can pack your bags and leave,” Renwick calls, his voice echoing up the stairs. “Up to you.”

“Motherfucking demon,” I mutter, and head down after him.

“Again!”

I hate Renwick.

I hate my stupid, uncooperative magick.

And, most of all, I hate the word *again*.

We’ve been at this for hours. Me, trying and failing to summon more than a candle-flame’s worth of fire. And Renwick, bastard that he is, staying right on my ass and not letting up for a single damn second.

“Again, Rosie!”

Glaring at him, I swipe a hand across the back of my forehead to wipe away the sheen of sweat there. “I need a break.”

“You need to summon something more powerful than a lit match.”

The sound that comes out of my mouth is somewhere between a curse and a growl.

“I need a *break*.”

“I’m the one who decides when you get a break.”

Motherfucking demon.

Maybe it would have been better if he really did bring me down in this cellar to murder me.

Although, ‘cellar’ isn’t really the best word for it. It’s like a whole other world down here beneath the manor.

I barely got to take it all in as I followed Renwick down the steps and lost count of how many levels of winding, twisting corridors we descended. Lit with flaming torches and branching off with hallways whose ends I couldn’t make out in the gloom, the labyrinth stretches far below the manor.

I’m not sure if I’m in awe, or completely creeped out to know this little kingdom of darkness has existed right beneath my feet the entire time I’ve been here.

“It’s carved into the hill,” Renwick had explained. “And serves as Odelia’s base of operations.”

My mind boggled over that for a moment. More details I could be privy

to if I decide to stay, an entire world of magick to explore.

As we descended, Renwick gave me a little primer about some of the things that go on down here. Workshops dedicated to constructing the glamours monsters use to move through the world unseen. Assembly rooms where classes on getting jobs and renting apartments and generally navigating the human world are conducted. Offices where the income generated by the Acres and all the witch and monster subsidiary businesses are divided for the benefit of everyone.

A whole community operating efficiently and taking care of each other.

A world I might already be a part of, if circumstances were different.

The room Renwick chose for training is fireproof, just like he said. Stone walls and floors, nothing inside but metal sconces burning on the walls to light the dark, oppressive space enough for us to see each other. Not that I'm really thrilled to see his face right now.

As soon as we started training, Renwick turned into an entirely different demon. Stern. Demanding. Uncompromising. Absolutely not going to settle for any of my bullshit or excuses.

Tragically, it's a good look on him.

Even with as pissed off as I am, I have to admit there's something about a bossy, commanding Renwick that's incredibly attractive.

Well, objectively, I mean. Because I'm far too fucking annoyed to appreciate the harsh beauty in his face when he gives me an order, or the way his unyielding attitude makes me want to fight him even harder, smash up against that arrogance of his again and again until it breaks.

Yeah. Definitely not thinking about any of that.

Not when I can barely get a flame going.

"Again, Rosie."

"No."

My flat denial makes his red eyes flare wide and his mouth set into a harsh scowl.

"No?" he asks, striding across the room.

"No," I say again, ignoring the way my breath catches when he's close enough to touch.

We stay locked in that stalemate for a few long, weighted moments. I'm sure as hell not going to be the one to break first, and apparently neither is Renwick. We stare each other down, and I pray to any gods who might be listening that he's not the kind of paranormal creature who can sense things

like scent and heart rate, because my pulse ticks up with each passing moment, and I'm sure I reek with nerves.

I don't want him to know how close I am to snapping right now.

Because even though I'm hardly summoning more than a match's worth of flame, I can feel all my magick roiling just under my skin.

It's different from what I felt with Silas. Dangerous. Unstable. Something I can't control or understand.

Something that scares me.

Despite what I agreed to with Odelia, I still can't make myself reach for it. Whatever walls I've erected between myself and my magick are staying firmly in place.

I'm afraid of what might wait on the other side.

Renwick either doesn't notice my inner turmoil, or chooses to ignore it. Instead, he throws out a different question, momentarily tugging me out of my spiral.

"When have you been able to access your magick before?"

The answer pops into my mind instantly, but I'm not about to spill. I clench my jaw and cross my arms over my chest, still stubbornly staring at him.

Renwick sighs. "Do you have to make everything so difficult?"

"For you, yes."

Another few seconds of silence and that crackling, contentious energy between us pulses hotter.

"Tell me about what happened at your last job."

I've just opened my mouth to let him know I'm absolutely not going to talk about that when Renwick cuts me off.

"And before you refuse, remember that Odelia expects me to report back on how our training is going."

I'd expected that would be the case, and the thinly veiled threat finally loosens my tongue.

"I set a filing cabinet on fire. It was an accident."

"An accident," Renwick repeats, not looking convinced. "Alright. So what caused this accident?"

I'd been so mad when it happened. Stewing in my frustration and indignation. Tired, so tired of Murphy and the way he'd been subtly harassing me for months. The audacity he had to make a move on me when I was just trying to do my job.

And when he'd immediately retaliated against my rejection, let me know exactly what kind of asshole he was, I'd lost it.

I didn't mean to set the filing cabinet on fire. I didn't mean to do anything.

One moment, I'd been sitting at my desk boiling over with all that fury and helplessness and dread, and the next I'd seen the flames.

Some of that memory must show on my face, and Renwick jumps on it immediately.

"Strong emotions?" he guesses, eyes lighting up with certainty. "That's what drives your magickal outbursts?"

"I don't have outbursts."

Goddess. I'm not a toddler losing my shit because I didn't get my favorite crackers at snack time.

"Outbursts. Flares. Whatever." Renwick brushes the matter of semantics aside with a careless wave of his hand. "It's not unheard of for emotions to rule your magick, Rosie. It's just something we have to work past."

"What do you mean by 'work past?'"

"I mean, we need to test those limits. Come up against those outbursts—*flares*—and work through them. Recognize when they're happening and redirect the energy. And lucky for you, you already seem to have at least some measure of control, if your little trick with the tarot card was any indication."

"The thing with the tarot card wasn't—"

"Oh really? You want to claim that me pushing your buttons and royally pissing you off wasn't causing some strong emotions?"

I bristle at that. The last thing I want is for Renwick to know how much he sets me off. "I wasn't—"

"It was written all over your face," Renwick says, leaning in so fast I don't have time to react, lowering his voice and murmuring into my ear. "You like to pretend you're tough as nails, don't you? But you're not as good at pretending as you think you are."

Fuck that. And fuck him. Acting like he knows me. Acting like he has any idea who I am or how I feel.

I'm about to protest again, step away from him, keep clinging on to all my defenses until they're solid enough that no one—not even Renwick—can get past them, when he slings an arm around my waist and pulls me into him.

His voice is even softer now. Tender. A velvet rasp against the shell of

my ear.

“I don’t mean that as an insult. Whatever happened before you got here, whatever made you build those walls around yourself, you don’t have to keep hiding behind them. Not here. Not with me.”

Renwick is warm and solid, the heavy band of his arm keeping me upright when my knees go a bit loose at his words.

“Let it go, Rosie. Whatever it is you’re so afraid of. Whatever you’re holding onto. Let it go.”

What he’s asking is... impossible.

Years, *fifteen* years’ worth of denying my magick, denying who I am and what I’m capable of. Fifteen years of fearing myself and what might happen if I lose control. Fifteen years of wishing I could be someone, *anyone*, but who I am.

“You know what I see when I look at you?” Renwick continues, still so gentle. “I see power, Rosie. And potential. I wish you could see it, too.”

The unexpected prick of tears in my eyes jerks me back to the present. The realization I’ve been letting Renwick hold me, murmur to me, be so intimate with me for far longer than I should have snaps the moment between us.

I take a shaky breath and step back. His arm falls away, and he watches me with a waiting calm.

It feels like a test.

Just like it did with Odelia, my path is still branching out in front of me. Accept myself as I am, or keep running. Reach over that wall and find out what’s waiting on the other side, or hide in its shadow forever.

I don’t know what the right choice is. I don’t know what will keep me safe and what will destroy me. I don’t have enough information or faith in myself to feel like I can decide with any kind of confidence.

But with a crimson-eyed demon still watching me, and the weight of my entire future pressing down on my shoulders, I pick a path.

“Alright,” I say, shaky but sure. “Let’s do it.”

There’s a flash of some emotion on Renwick’s face—something that’s not triumph and not quite satisfaction, something I might almost call pride if I didn’t know better—but he buries it under another cocky grin.

“That’s the spirit, Rosie.”

“Where... where do we start?”

Renwick steps closer. “Turn around.”

I do, and feel the warmth of him at my back as he presses in behind me.

“Where do you feel it?” Renwick murmurs. “Your magick. When you feel it building, where does it come from?”

“My chest. And my hands. But it comes from my chest first.”

He makes a low noise of acknowledgment in the back of his throat, a noise I can feel rumble through all the places we’re touching. A moment later, one big hand settles over the center of my chest, and the other nestles in just below my breasts. Renwick’s hold is firm, warm, and I should probably be more mad about it, but I don’t have time to work up any ire before he speaks again.

“Here? Is this where it comes from?”

Taking a shaky breath, I nod. And whether it’s Renwick’s touch or the lingering emotional overwhelm of this entire afternoon, I’m not sure, but my magick rushes up to meet his hands.

Like he can feel it beneath my skin, Renwick makes another low noise in the back of his throat. Approval, this time.

“Good. Very good. What does it feel like?”

“Fire,” I whisper. “It always feels like fire.”

He chuckles, and the sound of it makes my magick flare even brighter. “I bet it does. Just a little wildfire, aren’t you, Rosie?”

A small laugh slips out of me, and Renwick’s hold tightens for a moment before he loosens his grasp and speaks again.

“Step one in separating your magick from your emotions is accessing all of that power when you’re calm. You need to get to know it as a friend, not an enemy.”

A friend? I’ve only ever known my magick as something to fear, but in the spirit of surrendering, I nod again.

“Good.” Renwick’s graveled praise sends another shot of heat through me. “Focus on that power. Draw it up here—” His hand presses gently into my chest. “—and here.” His other hand drops to squeeze mine.

I obey and concentrate on the stirrings of magick beneath my skin. Like it always does, the feeling of my power rising makes my whole body want to rebel. I want to stop, to shove it down somewhere far, far beneath the surface, somewhere it can’t hurt me or anyone else. It goes against every natural impulse to bring it to the forefront now, and I lean into Renwick’s embrace to keep me steady as I work to call it forth.

“Just like that, Rosie,” he murmurs. “You feel it?”

“Yes,” I say, breath catching in my throat.

“Give it a shape. It bends to you, not the other way around.”

My magick responds to his command, to his approval, to the heat and the presence of him.

It builds from the center of my chest outwards. A warmth, a wave, cresting higher and higher until I’m nearly choking with it.

Renwick steps back, taking a few strides away from me. “Turn around.”

I do, still focusing on that building power. For the first time since... well, *ever*, maybe, it feels like something I can control, something that responds to my will.

Renwick’s eyes are lit with satisfaction at whatever he sees. “Hands up, Rosie. Look down.”

Facing my palms toward the ceiling and bringing my hands to my sides, a wave of shock ricochets through me at what I see.

Flames, cupped in both my palms. Controlled and burning brightly. Completely at my disposal. I allow another experimental pulse of my power and they grow even brighter, two pillars of pure, brilliant fire. My fire.

“Breathe,” Renwick says. “Focus on staying centered and calm.”

I try to obey, but it’s impossible to keep the tide of emotion from rising in my chest.

It’s not anger this time, or fear. It’s a burning, sparkling joy. Blazing and incandescent. Welling up from the center of me, it feels infinite, this joy. Like coming back to myself. Like letting out the breath I’ve been holding for fifteen years.

As if they’re responding to all of that emotion, the flames blaze higher, hotter, and my joy is threaded through with a whisper of panic.

“Rose,” Renwick says, a warning this time.

I want to listen to him. I *try* to listen to him.

Breathe, I need to breathe. Get this under control. Bring the flames down, come back to center, breathe, just—

All my panicked thoughts burn to ash as a wall of flames breaks from me and engulfs Renwick completely.

I drop to my knees on the stone floor, bones clattering painfully as I pull my arms into my chest and lock them there. A cage for the magick I shove as far back down inside as I can, staring in horror at the firestorm I've unleashed.

Oh goddess. Oh no. I didn't mean to... didn't think... couldn't stop it...

"Renwick," I rasp, getting enough of a grip on myself to look up at him with tears in my eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. I didn't mean to—"

A deep, rumbling cough interrupts my panicked babbling as my flames clear and Renwick steps forward, thumping his fist on his chest.

"No worse for wear, Rosie. I'm durable, remember?"

The laugh of near-hysterical relief I let out is choked and wet, but it's followed immediately by another wave of panic.

Sure, Renwick's alright, but what about the next person?

What about the next time I do something I don't mean to do, send flames shooting out from my stupid, unstable hands and really hurt someone?

I'm a disaster. A danger, with these powers I can't control.

And he wants me to try to train them? Use them on purpose? When I feel like I'm already teetering on an edge I don't know how to step back from?

Fifteen years of learning to fear my magick crashes over me all at once.

My mother's tears behind her locked bedroom door. The absolute silence I was always met with whenever I tried to talk about my magick. The fear in her eyes when any little piece of it showed its ugly head.

"I need to get out of here."

Renwick takes another step toward me. "Hey, it's alright. No harm done."

I shake my head in immediate denial as I push to my feet. "That's not... I just can't do this."

"Rose."

His deep, compelling command is enough to give me pause. Only for a moment, though, just long enough to see he isn't mad, or disappointed, or

horrified. Just like he said, he's no worse for wear. He's looking at me with a mixture of concern and encouragement. Like all of this is no big deal. Like I don't have any reason to be spiraling right now.

"It's alright," he says again. "You were doing so well. We can try again, and—"

"No."

Whatever it is he hears in my voice, Renwick stops arguing. His mouth snaps shut, and when I turn to flee, he doesn't stop me.

Away from here. I have to get away from here.

My blood pumps in my ears and my stomach churns as I rush up the stairs out of the labyrinth.

The remnants of my magick are still prickling against my skin, crawling up my throat, clawing at my back as I climb up and up through the maze of halls and staircases. The flash of fire I unleashed feels like it's burned permanently into my retinas, a reminder of exactly what kind of destruction I'm capable of.

Renwick and I must have been underground for longer than I realized, because by the time I make it out of the labyrinth and into the world above, twilight is falling over Edgar's Acres.

I don't stop running, not even when I get strange looks from the cast members and guests I pass. All I know is the need to be alone, somewhere I can't hurt anyone else.

Through the front gates and down the hill toward the staff village, I've almost convinced myself I'm going to make it safely back to my cottage and lock myself away without running into anyone else. At least until a familiar voice calls out behind me and my heart leaps into my throat.

"Rosemary."

Fuck. I can't see Silas right now.

My step falters and I almost go sprawling into the middle of the path, but a startlingly solid shadow bands around my waist, giving just enough support for me to catch myself and stay upright.

The skitter of Silas's magick across my skin is one more unwanted reminder of the power I've just called on. I stumble away, putting a few yards of distance between us before I turn to face him.

"Rosemary?" he asks again. "What happened?"

I shake my head, choking back tears and unable to answer him. He takes a couple of steps forward, and I jerk away.

“Please,” I rasp. “Don’t come near me.”

He halts in the middle of the path. “Alright. I’ll stay here. Will you tell me what happened?”

My throat tightens even more at the warmth and affection and calm coaxing in his tone. “I... can’t.”

“Did something happen with Ren? Did he—”

“It wasn’t him. It was me. I... I...” I can’t make the words come out.

I could have killed Renwick. I *would* have killed Renwick if he weren’t some kind of indestructible demon.

“Rosemary,” Silas says, still with all his innate gentleness and goodness. Kindness I don’t deserve. “You’re scaring me a little. What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing you can do to help.”

Silas shakes his head and takes a step closer. Two of his shadows reach forward like he means to embrace me with them.

“Stop,” I say, voice coming out in a strangled whisper. “I’m not... you shouldn’t... I don’t want to hurt you.”

Silas freezes. “You’re not going to hurt me. Why do you think you would?”

“My fire. I was training with Renwick, and it... I... lost control. I could have hurt him. I could have killed him.”

My voice breaks, and Silas makes a low noise of disagreement in the back of his throat. “You were never going to hurt him. Renwick is—”

“Durable. I know. That doesn’t change the fact that I’m... I’m... who I am. *What* I am.”

Again, Silas shakes his head. “That’s why Odelia wanted you to train with him. So the two of you could figure it out. So you’d be able to safely test the limits of all of that power you have. I’m sure Renwick understands. I’m sure he’s not—”

“No,” I interrupt, not sure exactly which part I disagree with, but unable to take one more gentle word.

Why doesn’t he understand? Why don’t either of them understand?

I don’t belong here.

I don’t belong *anywhere*. Not with as dangerous and unpredictable as my magick is, not with as weak and afraid as I am—unable to control it, a danger to everyone around me, not fit to—

“Darling.”

The soft caress of two shadows against my cheeks makes my chest

tighten painfully.

I can't do this. To myself, to Silas, to Renwick. I can't stand it.

"Just leave me alone, Silas."

He gathers his shadows back to him. Do I imagine the way his darkness deepens? The way it obscures his face, making it hazy and indistinguishable again, too opaque for me to see him clearly?

"Alright," he says softly, already fading into the surrounding night. "Alright. If that's what you want, I'll go."

Tears gather in my eyes, making him even more blurry, and his parting words are nearly lost in the soft hush of evening wind.

"We're here for you, Rosemary. Both of us. Please know that."

Alone in the woods as the last fingers of daylight stain the sky a burnt orange through the forest's reaching canopy, I realize I can't feel any more magick.

Not mine. Not Silas's.

It's all gone. Retreated with my harsh words or pushed down so far I couldn't find it right now even if I wanted to.

A stronger gust of wind sends a chill through me, and the first waves of exhaustion and drain creep in as the last of my adrenaline fades. I trudge the rest of the way to my cottage on legs that feel like lead, and can't make it any further than the front room.

I collapse onto the sofa and drag a blanket off the floor to drape over myself.

Shivering and entirely wrung through, I surrender to the weight pressing down on me. My eyes slide shut, and blissful darkness seeps over me.

Some distant, dim voice calling from the corner of my mind is still telling me to leave. To get up, pack my bags, and get myself as far from Edgar's Acres as I can. But I can't listen to or obey it.

No, all I can do is surrender to sleep, letting that darkness pull me under completely.

If the Goddess had any mercy, my oblivion would have been dreamless.

But apparently she doesn't, because I can't find peace even in sleep. Instead, I find fitful dreams filled with fire and fear and hazy memories my mind can barely register before they're gone.

I'm five years old, playing in the corner of my father's workshop while he tinkers with some concoction that smells like sulfur and charcoal.

I'm eight, listening to the phone call that upended my world.

I'm twelve, and the burnt remnants of the book report I worked so hard on just to be given a C-minus are scattered on my bedroom floor. My mother appears in the doorway, and when she sees them smoking there, ashes curling in on themselves like withered leaves, she cries out in shock.

I'm twenty-three, blood rushing in my ears as a filing cabinet burns in front of me. A fire alarm is blaring and there's shouting coming from somewhere nearby, but I can't make out the words.

It's not until I jerk awake with a sharp gasp that I realize what they are—dreams, only dreams—and they can't hurt me.

Sitting up on the couch with an aching body and eyes that feel like they've been rubbed raw with sandpaper, I take a few deep breaths to try to calm the racing of my heart.

It only takes a few seconds for the memories to come crashing in.

Renwick. The labyrinth. My fire. Silas disappearing into the night.

With a groan, I drop my head into my hands. My earlier panic is gone, and shame creeps in to fill the empty space. I play the moments over and over in my mind on a loop, each detail horribly crisp and clear.

I could have killed Renwick tonight. If he were any normal human or a less-durable monster, I would have. He would be a charred crisp on the cellar floor.

Even though he seemed so calm about everything, even though he wasn't afraid or angry or horrified by what I did, I can't forget. Nor can I forget my soul-deep certainty that I need to get away from this place.

I don't belong here. When I decided to come, I thought maybe...

There's no use thinking about it. Not now. Not when I've already proven I'm a danger to everyone at Edgar's Acres. The magick of this place draws my own too close to the surface, and staying any longer would be a monumental mistake.

There's no use wishing things were different, that *I* could be different. There's no use wondering if I should give myself some more time, find Renwick and apologize, give training another...

No.

I need to go.

Standing from the couch, I let out a low groan as my muscles protest being upright and moving again. I've got a half-formed plan in mind to go into the bedroom, pack up the few belongings I have here, and get the hell out of dodge, when I hear it.

"Rosemary?" Silas's mist and midnight voice calls faintly from the other side of the door.

When I take a step closer, I can feel him. The magick of him, the gentle power that seeps beneath the crack in the door and wends its way around me.

I rest my forehead on the smooth wood, thoughts tangled, heart tugged in two directions.

I should tell him to go. I should tell him I'm leaving.

Even with the door between us, his darkness permeates the air. It's cool and soothing, humming over my skin in an echo of the power I shared with him before.

"Rosemary," he murmurs again.

I close my eyes. More of that darkness washes over me, and I realize he could come in if he wanted to. It would barely take half a heartbeat for him to appear in the cottage beside me.

But he waits. Still there, still leaving it up to me what I want to do.

It's enough to put a pin in my panic and determination, enough to deflate my sense of certainty and leave me wondering just what the hell I'm doing, what I'm going to do.

I breathe deep and swing the door open.

"Hi, Silas." My voice is raspy with tears and shame.

"Hello, darling." His shadowed gaze roves over my face. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm... fine."

A shift in those shadows, and the huff of a sigh as they clear enough for me to get a better look at his wry smile.

“You’ll have to be a better liar than that if you want to convince me, Rosemary.”

“Fine. I feel like shit.”

“Are you hurt? If you need a healer, I can—”

“No,” I hastily assure him. “I mean, it’s just magick drain. No need to call a healer. I feel worse about what I said to you. I was an asshole. I’m sorry, Silas. I never should have—”

My words cut off with the twist of a shadow around my cheek.

“Apology more than accepted.”

I lean into the faint caress and Silas moves closer. His darkness strokes over my shoulders, my back, the nape of my neck.

“Why are you here?” I ask, then realize how shitty that sounds. “I mean, sorry, not that I want you to go. But after how I acted... I wouldn’t have expected you to stick around.”

“I haven’t been here the whole time, but I did come back earlier,” he admits. “Just onto your porch. Just until I could sense you sleeping inside. After what happened last time with your magick drain... I’m so sorry, I should never have left you like that.”

“I told you to,” I remind him in a whisper.

“I know you did,” he says, and the ghost of a smile on his face cuts straight to the center of my aching chest. “But when I felt you wake I wanted to come and check on you. And now that I know you’re alright I’ll do just that, if it’s still what you want. Say the word and I’ll go, Rosemary.”

More darkness pressing close. Tentative and searching, asking for permission.

I could still tell him to go. End this. Let him know I’m about to pack my bags. The words are right there—poison on my tongue.

Because I don’t want to leave this moment.

Goddess, I need to find some kind of even keel.

These swings from resolve to panic, from certainty to uncertainty... there has to be some kind of end to it. It’s not fair to Silas or Renwick... or to myself.

I’m mortified by how I reacted earlier, and some part of me still wants to run out of the pure humiliation of it. But when I meet Silas’s gaze—ever-patient while I work everything out—it’s not accusation I find there. It’s soft

encouragement and empathy, steadiness and a safety I want to sink into.

The last thoughts of leaving tonight fade from my mind.

I'm still nowhere near ready to decide the rest of it—my place here, my training—but I'm also not ready to let this moment end. Not when Silas's shadows soothe all the ragged parts of me that shattered in the labyrinth with Renwick. Not when, even if I can't touch or hold him, Silas is somehow the solid presence I so desperately need right now.

"Rose," I whisper. "I told you it was alright to call me Rose."

Silas's shadows shift, and the soft smile on his face grows even wider. "Say the word, Rose."

"Stay with me?"

A pulse of darkness between us, an understanding.

"Of course. Of course I'll stay with you."

Taking a couple shaky steps, I settle in one of the small wrought-iron chairs on the porch. I inhale the night air deeply, and Silas comes to stand just in front of me, leaning back against the porch railing.

"I... spoke to Ren."

I swallow around the lump in my throat before replying. "You did?"

"Yes. And he's not angry with you either. He understands accidents happen and all of this is a part of your training."

I'm shaking my head before Silas even finishes speaking. "Accidents? Most people's accidents don't involve giant, deadly fireballs."

Silas chuckles. "And most people aren't powerful witches with very durable demons to withstand their flames."

Powerful. Not a word I would have ever used to describe my magick. *Dangerous. Unstable. Abhorrent.*

"Still," I say, reaching for more excuses. "I don't think I can keep training. Not with how poorly the first time went."

"Poorly? Ren said you did wonderfully."

"Then apparently he's a better liar than I am."

"It will take time," Silas says gently. "Ren didn't master his abilities in a single day, and neither did I. If you were around when I was a youth... Goddess, half the time when I meant to send myself somewhere I'd end up miles away, completely lost."

I laugh a little at that, and file away the question of Ren's abilities for later. Other than extraordinary durability, I'm still not sure what the demon can do, but also know it's not Silas's place to tell me.

“What I mean to say, Rose,” Silas goes on, “is that you can take the time you need, and make as many mistakes as you need. All of it is alright. Odelia understands that, and so does Ren.”

At the mention of Odelia, I fight a flinch and look down at my hands, color rising on my cheeks. “How pissed is she about me freaking out like that, and for missing my shift?”

“Odelia? As far as I know, she’s unaware of what happened.”

I snap my gaze up to meet his. “Really? Didn’t anyone notice when I wasn’t there in the ticket booth tonight?”

Silas shakes his head. “We let Lara know you wouldn’t be there and found someone to fill in for you.”

“So Odelia really doesn’t know?”

“If she does, she didn’t hear it from us.”

I scoff a little at that. “I thought Renwick was reporting to her.”

Silas pauses before he answers, studying me with soft contemplation on his face. “You really dislike the demon, don’t you?”

A fresh round of shame climbs up the back of my neck.

“I...” I start, then trail off.

Do I dislike Renwick?

I mean, yeah, the demon *is* kind of a lot. But what has he really done to me other than be a pain in my ass about training, and given me a stupid nickname?

And then taken my bad attitude in stride and forgiven me immediately for throwing a giant fireball in his face. Partnered up with Silas to cover me tonight and keep me out of trouble with my aunt.

“I... don’t think I dislike him,” I finally manage. “He’s probably not my biggest fan, though, with as much of an asshole as I’ve been to him.”

Silas chuckles. “You might be surprised. Sarcasm and bickering are Renwick’s idea of foreplay.”

The color on my cheeks isn’t all shame anymore, not with the hint of provocation in Silas’s tone, the knowing way he looks at me when he says it.

“Is it?” I can’t help but ask. “Then he probably thinks I’ve been ready to hop in the sack with him since the day I got here.”

Silas laughs again. “He wants to see you succeed, even if the way he goes about it might be a little abrasive.” As he speaks, his gaze wanders skyward, like he’s lost in some memory. “It’s just part of who he is, and I don’t think he’d be capable of changing even if he wanted to.”

There it is again, that edge of affectionate sadness. Something tangled and painful, a history between them that's probably not a particularly happy one given how they act around each other now.

I reach a hand to where Silas's shadow rests on the railing, and though my fingers sink right through, his power is there. It presses back against me as Silas pulls himself from whatever he was remembering.

He smiles again. The softness there, the reassurance of his words, all of it reminds me once more what a giant idiot I've been over the past few hours.

What if I'm the only one making things more of a catastrophe than they need to be? In my panic and fear, I ran out on Renwick when he was just trying to help me, and then snapped at Silas for doing the same. And here he is, still sitting with me, still patient with me.

"Why are you both being so nice to me?"

I fight back a cringe at the way the question comes out—small and insecure. Silas, though, still has nothing but kindness in his voice as he answers.

"I can only speak for myself, but from the moment you arrived here, I sensed you might be in need of a friend."

"Is that something else your shadows picked up on?" I try for a joke, remembering what he told me earlier about being able to sense me sleeping.

Another pulse of dark power against my hand. "No, Rose, they didn't. Those beautiful brown eyes of yours told me everything I needed to know. I hate to tell you this, darling, but you're not as much of a mystery as you might try to be."

An unlikely smile tugs at the corners of my lips. "I'm an open book, huh?"

Silas moves closer and sinks to the worn wooden floorboards until he might almost be kneeling. Tendrils of his darkness reach out to brush up and down my arms.

"Well now, I don't know if that's entirely true. There's much, much more I'd like to get to know about the parts of yourself you keep hidden."

His shadows keep caressing, and I lean closer. He meets me half-way until we're in an almost-embrace. Phantom, night-kissed wind brushes against my skin, and that familiar hum of power sparks higher in my veins.

"You said you... *felt* me sleeping. What do you mean by that?"

When I tilt my head back and catch a glimpse of Silas's face, he looks a little abashed. "It's a part of my power. A part of who I am. Perceiving

energy from others.”

I consider that for a moment. “Must be kind of tough, having to filter through everyone here and take in all that energy.”

“I’m not able to feel... everyone. At least not the way I feel you.”

All his darkness pauses, waiting for my reaction to that soft declaration.

I raise a hand, and a tendril of shadow is right there to meet it. Twisting between my fingers, ghosting over my palm and down my arm. Like a reaching vine, it encircles my forearm, binding the two of us together.

“How do I feel?”

He laughs, the sound of it a little hoarse this time. “It’s hard for me to describe.”

“You feel like midnight to me. Your power. It’s darkness and starlight and peace. It’s wonderful, Silas.”

“You’re all fire, Rose,” he rasps, shadows reaching my shoulder and banding around my neck in a gentle collar. “Burning so brightly I can’t look away.”

My whole body aches to touch him, really touch him. To lean in and lay my cheek against his chest and nestle in close, let that darkness of his consume me completely, let it chase away the last of my panic and fear.

But even with that ache coursing through me, this is still bliss. Being held by him, cloaked in the protection of his shadows. It makes me wonder what more there might be, what more he might want from me, what we could be together...

“Would you like to come inside?”

All those shadows go still as death.

“Do you want me to come inside?”

I’ve never seen Silas more clearly than I do right now. His shadows shift, then dissipate enough for me to see the surprise in his expression.

And the need.

It’s a sharp-edged want, so very different from the gentle, patient shade I know. An urgency, a dark desire balanced on a knife’s edge, waiting for me.

“Yes, Silas.”

Permission granted, Silas moves, a shadow tightening around my wrist as he tugs me toward the door. It’s a stronger pull than before, almost solid. I could still break the hold if I wanted, but I follow him with a laugh of surprise, reaching for the handle.

He crowds in close, shadows curling around me as I let us inside.

As soon as the front door closes, the magick between us shifts. A charge, a crackling, a static sort of energy that reaches in and pulses low in my belly. In the small space it’s hard to tell where Silas’s darkness ends and the shadows of the room begin. He seems to expand, to bleed into those shadows until he’s all around me.

With each of my fast, shallow breaths, I taste the magick of him. Midnight dew and the last embers of a bonfire. Veins of frost on fallen leaves. Power I can almost reach out and touch, share it with him like I did on the night he made his shadows mine.

It reminds me just how far from human he is, and just how far out of my depth I am right now.

The only lovers I’ve had have been human. Whether they’ve treated me well or left me wanting, they’ve all been so very ordinary. Nothing like the being of darkness and magick in front of me.

And absolutely none of them made me feel like this. This need. This hunger. This power racing through me.

But that doesn’t mean I know how to... do this.

Instead of the crashing bodies, grasping hands, and tangling limbs I’m

used to, being here in the dark with Silas is more of a slow enveloping. He's everywhere, all at once, a part of the night itself.

"How do I... How do we..."

Silas laughs, a low rasp in the dim of the room. "I'm assuming you've never been with a shade before?"

"No." I shake my head, a flush rising on my cheeks. "You might have to walk me through it."

"Perhaps I should show you instead."

There's so much warm, dark promise in his words. A thread of teasing that nestles itself in the pit of my stomach and makes an aching heat build in my core.

"Okay," I say, breathless. "Yeah. You can show me."

A tremor in the shadows as they press closer. "Do you trust me, Rose?"

"Yes, Silas. I trust you."

A tendril of darkness bands around my wrist once more, tugging me gently down the short hall, past the bathroom and to the cottage's only bedroom. The door creaks open, pushed by a phantom wind, and I follow Silas's silhouette to the side of the bed.

He moves faster than I can blink, shifting so he's behind me, and the shadow around my wrist drops to the hem of my shirt.

"Can I take this off?"

"Yes." The word catches in my throat as he tugs it up and off me in one smooth move.

A sound emerges from his darkness, something almost like the disapproving click of a tongue. For a horrible second I think it's because he doesn't like what he sees. It's only a moment later, though, that he uses a shadow to draw back the curtains and a beam of moonlight illuminates the room.

"Much better."

A tendril of shadow caresses over the soft curve of my stomach. I tilt my head to get a look at Silas behind me and find him watching with rapt attention, eyes roving over my moonlit skin.

"How about this?" he murmurs, another shadow catching on the clasp of my bra.

"That can go, too."

Once it's gone, Silas lets out a low groan and bands a shadow around my shoulders, nudging me to face him.

“Lovely,” he breathes. “You’re absolutely lovely.”

The soft awe in his words sparks a fire low in my belly, making me bold. My hands land on the button of my jeans and I smirk at him.

“And you haven’t even seen all of me yet.”

His gaze snaps up, shadows clearing enough for me to see the naked hunger in his eyes.

Holding his gaze, I unfasten and unzip them, shimmying my hips and working the tight denim down my legs. His shadows follow the path my hands make down my hips and thighs, tracing the shape of me and whispering over my skin.

When I reach for the waist of my panties, Silas lets out a choked noise of protest, stopping me.

“Leave those.”

They’re nothing but black cotton, but they may as well be French lace with the way Silas is looking at me.

“Lay down, Rose.”

My whole body hums with awareness—of Silas, of his magick, of the darkness gathering close—as I lower myself to my bed and lay back on my pillows. Silas follows, shadows ghosting across my skin as he hovers over me.

A wisp of midnight trails over my lips and I gasp, tasting the crisp flavor of him on my tongue. It dips lower, exploring me, mapping a course over my jaw and down my throat toward the slope of my breast.

“What I wouldn’t give to be able to kiss you for real,” Silas murmurs.

His words send a pang of unease through me. “Is this... alright for you? Touching me like this when I can’t touch you, too?”

“It’s more than alright, my darling. When I’m here with you, like this, your pleasure is mine.”

“Really?” I ask, a bit of a hitch in my voice over his use of the endearment. “Do you mean that literally?”

“Yes, Rose. I do.”

As if to demonstrate, he curls a shadow around the tight peak of my nipple, squeezing in a brief jolt of pleasure-pain that has me stifling a moan and arching off the bed.

A rough sound breaks from Silas before he speaks again.

“Is it alright for you?” he asks, drawing back. “If this is all too strange, or if you’d rather not be with someone who can’t—”

“No,” I say in a rush of breath. “This is good. I want this.”

Despite the reassurance, Silas stays silent for a few moments, indecision still darkening his expression.

“Would it be different if we... if you had an anchor?” I ask.

It’s just a guess, an inkling tugging at the back of my mind from when he mentioned it before, but it seems to hit close to the truth.

“If I had an anchor...” he says slowly. “I would be able to shift from this form into something more... solid. Corporeal.”

The idea of it makes my chest tighten. Silas, solid and touchable. What would that be like?

“And have you ever had an anchor?”

A few seconds of weighted silence follow my question, and Silas’s shadows pull back even further. I curl into a sitting position and find him hovering near the side of the bed. In the silver moonlight his expression is tight, guarded, and unmistakable sorrow and regret thread through his next words.

“No, I’ve never had an anchor. I thought I’d found someone once, but it wasn’t... it wasn’t quite enough.” He shakes his head and lets out a short, harsh sigh. “Perhaps *I* wasn’t enough. Perhaps there’s something wrong with me that makes it impossible to—”

“Don’t say that.”

The vehemence in my tone startles him, and he jerks his head up to look at me again.

“Be here with me,” I coax. “Right here. Just like this. I want this as much as you do.”

Indecision and need war with each other in the harsh planes of his shadowed face.

I reach out a hand. “Please, Silas.”

A shudder moves through his shadows before one unfurls and meets my grasp.

Silas comes back to the bed, inching up my body until he’s stretched out along my full length. I raise my other hand and it’s immediately entwined in darkness, enveloped and bound as he eases them both over my head and pins them to the headboard behind me.

“I want this too, Rose. Right here. Just like this.”

Silas keeps me pinned as he makes another slow journey down the length of my body. His darkness strokes along every curve, every inch of

bare skin until I'm writhing and moaning, arching against his hold.

A nearly solid tendril curls around the back of my neck, tipping my head forward so I can see the shadows gathering between my thighs. The sight is so startling, so impossibly erotic that I gasp, pussy clenching as he caresses toward my core.

"You're wound so tight, aren't you, darling?" Silas murmurs, brushing a shadow against my clit over the fabric of my panties, making me arch into the sensation and gasp again. "Just waiting for someone to help you release all of that tension."

"Yes," I breathe. "Please, Silas."

With a surprisingly forceful tug, he strips me of my underwear and tosses them aside.

Bared entirely to him, he takes his time exploring me some more. He tests all my sensitive places to see which ones make me groan and which ones make me strain against him, silently begging for more.

His dark magick joins each shadowed touch, heightening the waves of midnight pleasure he's drawing from me. It's like nothing I've ever felt before, this melding of sex and magick and moonlight.

When my own power rushes up to meet it, it's not a conflagration this time, but an ember. A heat that crests and burns, but doesn't consume me. A flame that licks along my skin in a slow-building smolder.

And when Silas finally, *finally* curls one of those shadows around my clit and draws on me, hard, it pulses in my veins like a million flying sparks. His magick and mine. Our shared pleasure as he gasps with me, moves with me, experiences every sensation with me.

My body doesn't seem to be nearly enough to contain everything I'm feeling. Pure, dark, primal, I writhe and buck against the shadows that bind me, and Silas is right there with more soothing tenderness.

"Easy, darling. Let me take care of you." His voice is sin and starlight, a rasp against my aching core.

He works me like that—darkness enveloping me completely, shadows teasing my clit, magick humming over my skin—until I'm stretched to a breaking point.

My back bows off the bed as I come, crying out with the force of it.

Silas releases my wrists and moves until he's hovering over me again. His darkness keeps me anchored through every pulse and spasm, and his own ragged breath and pleasure-filled groans meld with mine.

When I slump back to my bed in sated bliss, he's right there next to me. He stretches out beside me, soothing me with gentle caresses as the last of my tremors subside. We stay that way for a little while, basking in the afterglow.

"How was that for you?" I ask when I'm finally coherent enough to speak.

Silas brushes my hair away from my face with one of his shadows. "I feel like I should be asking you that question."

I nuzzle into that darkness. "Well, if you were telling the truth about being able to feel the pleasure I feel, then I think I already know the answer."

He laughs again, and we both settle back against the pillows. Silence falls, but it's comfortable, easy. As much apprehension as I may have originally felt about how things would work between us, there's nothing but warm satisfaction coursing through me now.

"I'm glad," Silas murmurs a couple of minutes later, tone tinged with sadness. "I'm glad I could be... good for you."

I frown, the quiet coziness of the moment quickly slipping away. "Of course you're good for me."

He makes a sound in the back of his throat that isn't quite agreement, and I prop myself up on an elbow to look over at him.

Our earlier conversation crowds back into my mind. About what might happen if he had an anchor. About the possibility of him being solid, having a body that could touch and be touched.

Is that something he needs? Something I can't give him?

And what he said about there being someone in his past who might have been that anchor for him, someone he talks about with longing and regret...

Suspicion whispers at the back of my mind, and though it might not be the time or place to ask, the question slips out before I can stop it.

"Was it Renwick?" I ask softly. "Who you thought might be your anchor?"

A long, weighted silence precedes Silas's answer. "Yes, it was."

A few more puzzle pieces fit together. All that tension. The way everyone around here seems to know there's history between them.

"Why wasn't he?"

For a second, I think Silas won't answer. I'm sure I've crossed some sort of line and pried where I have no right to. But a moment later he sighs and wraps a shadow around my hand in a gentle squeeze.

"I don't know why he wasn't. And I also don't know who was more

broken up about it—me or Renwick.”

I try to tighten my grip on the shadow curled around my hand, but my fingers sink right through.

“Does it bother you?” Silas asks. “That he and I used to be involved?”

I shake my head. “No, it doesn’t. Everyone has exes. And I can... see the appeal. I guess. If you’re into sarcasm and arguing as foreplay.”

Silas huffs a sorrow-edged laugh. “Believe me, I of all people know how charming and infuriating the demon can be.”

We lapse into silence again, at least until another question I probably shouldn’t ask slips out.

“Could I be your anchor?”

Silas’s voice is gentle, laced with more regret. “It doesn’t work that way, darling. It’s not... a choice. The bond between shade and anchor is something that springs up all on its own. Some strange magick we’ve never quite understood.”

“So, it still could? I could still be that for you?”

Silas is silent long enough for me to hear the answer without him having to say it.

No. It can’t. I’m not. Whoever his anchor is, it’s not me, and it’s not Renwick. And continuing to ask him about it is probably more hurtful than anything else. I open my mouth to apologize, but Silas speaks before I can.

“It’s not anything you need to worry about,” he murmurs. “And nor do you need to limit yourself or feel... tied to me in any way. While you’re here at Edgar’s Acres.”

I frown in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if there’s anyone else you’re involved with here. Someone who can give you more than I can, enough to—”

“Don’t say that about yourself. You’re—”

“Forgive me. I misspoke. What I meant is, don’t deny yourself any part of this world, Rosemary. I know you have a choice to make about whether you’re going to stay, and I want you to explore all possible reasons you might have to make it. One way or another.”

A hundred questions bubble up on my tongue, but I’m not able to put any of them into words.

Does he mean Renwick? Does he think the two of us are... no. I’ve made it clear what I think about the demon. Someone else, then? Does *Silas* have someone else?

I think about the freedom I've seen amongst the Acres' staff and actors, the casual relationships and partnerings that seem to change with each new phase of the moon.

Maybe it's just... different here. Or maybe having something committed and serious isn't what Silas wants, not when his anchor might still be waiting out there for him somewhere.

But putting any of those thoughts into questions would sound too much like making accusations.

We barely know each other, and I don't even know if I'm going to stay.

I don't know what my future looks like, if it will be here or back in the mundane world. I can't make any promises or commitments right now, and it would be unfair of me to expect Silas would want to, either, when he's well aware there are no guarantees with me.

With all that in mind, maybe I can just let it go for now. Enjoy this. Do exactly what he says and take all the time I need to decide.

"Alright," I say softly, laying back down and deciding to set it all aside for now.

Silas curls around me, folding me into him once more. There are no more words between us, nothing but the soft rasp of our shared breath and the weight of all those questions, the faint silver light of the moon and the gentle dark of his shadows.

I wake alone the next morning, with only the ghost of Silas's magick on my skin to remind me he was here at all.

I don't know when he slipped out, and as I get up, shower, and dress for the day, it's with a strange heaviness in the bottom of my stomach over how we ended our conversation last night.

I'm not really sure how to feel about any of it.

The dark, stirring intimacy Silas and I shared, and how he pulled away after.

The fact that I'm not his anchor, and likely won't ever be.

Everything I learned about him and Renwick, and their falling out when the demon wasn't his anchor, either.

And that's not even the end of my worries.

Because as I step outside, lock the door behind me, and make my way down the forest path toward the Acres, I know there's another tough conversation waiting for me.

It's a conversation that involves a demon and an apology and a whole lot of eating crow for how badly I overreacted yesterday.

Approaching the front gates, I spot Howard speaking with another of the gargoyles. I catch his eye, and he greets me with a wide, stony smile.

"Hey Howard," I say, returning his smile. "Have you seen Renwick?"

Howard nods toward the manor. "Saw him heading inside earlier. He's probably in the Parlor."

Lucifer's Parlor, Renwick's signature set.

After thanking him, I walk up to the manor with my heart lodged in my throat. My father brought me here once when I was little—not when the nightly haunting was in full swing, but just to walk through and see the place—and I haven't stepped foot inside since.

A wave of prickling magick breaks across my skin as I step up the wide front stairs onto the sweeping wrap-around porch.

It's familiar magick. Bramwell magick. Odelia and my father's magick.

My magick.

Generations of it hum from the grounds of Edgar's Acres, all coalescing here at the manor and in the labyrinth below. Wards and enchantments and layers of spellwork that reach out like they're beckoning me inside.

It's not exactly a comfortable feeling, but as I grasp the door's handle it's not repulsive, either. It's tentative, searching, like the house and I are sizing each other up, deciding if this relationship is going to be cordial or adversarial.

Probably a bit insane, actually, to be thinking that way about an inanimate structure, but nothing about the manor *feels* inanimate as I let myself inside.

No, from where I stand the manor is living, breathing, watching. An entity unto itself.

The worn black floorboards creak lightly underfoot as I cross the threshold. Above, an ornate, unlit chandelier hangs artfully draped in cobwebs, and when I take a few more slow steps into the room, I swear the antique Bramwell family portraits on the wall are watching me. Maybe they're judging, too, deciding whether I'm worthy of this place.

"What are you doing in here?"

Margot's voice cuts through the entryway. Startled, I turn to face her. I expect disapproval, irritation at me for being somewhere I'm not supposed to be, but instead find her watching me curiously, head tilted to one side.

"Looking for Renwick," I say. "I'm supposed to be training with him, and Howard let me know he was in the Parlor."

Margot nods. "Yeah, it's just down that way, if you want me to show you?"

"That would be great," I tell her, relieved I don't have to confess I don't know my way around our family's generational home.

Margot leads me down a long hallway that branches off into several other corridors. We take a couple of corners, keep walking, and it suddenly strikes me that this whole place is big, really big, not just bigger than I remember when I was a kid, but bigger than it possibly could be given how it looks from the outside.

"Is the manor spelled?" I ask her as we continue on. "To be bigger inside than it is outside?"

Margot laughs a little at my revelation. "Yes, one of Odelia's finer bits of magick. The expansion charms she cast meld perfectly with the

confounding enchantments on the grounds so that none of the guests will question it, either.”

My mind reels for a moment at the complexity of that kind of spellwork, and just how powerful a witch it would take to cast and maintain spells so intricate.

We continue on down the corridor, and I peer into a few of the open rooms as we pass by.

The full manor experience is made up of individual scenes. The tableaux played out in each of the opulent rooms are designed to capture guests’ imaginations and provide a unique thrill with each new chamber explored.

In one, two vampires argue over an empty coffin, trying to decide whether the lighting should be blood red or draped in black silk.

In another, a werewolf prowls the perimeter, making sure the curtains are pulled back to display an illusion of the full moon.

The sets are intricate, and from the passionate discussions I’ve overheard from the cast, they take great pride in making each scene bigger, bolder, more terrifying and immersive than the last.

“Here we are.” Margot stops and gestures to the door in front of us. “Renwick should be inside.”

I’m just reaching for the handle when she speaks again.

“Rosemary?”

“Yeah?” I ask, turning to face her.

“Odelia told me about your training. And I just wanted to say I’m glad. It’s good to see another Bramwell witch around the Acres.”

She gives me a small, encouraging smile and I return it, even if the words make my chest tighten a little.

Another Bramwell witch. One of the many who have walked these halls, played their part and contributed to all the work happening here. A legacy of generations, one I still haven’t decided whether I’m going to accept my place within.

When she turns and leaves, I reach for the door handle again, and that pulse of uncertainty grows even tighter.

But I know I owe Renwick an apology for what happened yesterday, and probably my thanks as well for covering my ass after I freaked out on him, so I take a deep breath and ease it open.

The parlor looks like something out of a Gothic dream. Darkly upholstered chairs and sofas, black paneling on the walls, blood red carpet on

the floor. Not a single window to let in even a sliver of daylight. Sconces on the walls burning with black flames, casting the room in shifting, sinister shadows.

And a demon crouched in the far corner, fiddling with something near the wall.

“Renwick.”

His head whips around immediately, and a flash of surprise crosses his face when he sees me standing there.

“Hi Rosemary,” he says, slowly unfurling that broad, tall frame of his.

He’s wearing his signature black leather pants again today, along with a loose white tunic top unbuttoned to show a deep vee of sculpted maroon chest. His tail swishes idly behind him as he shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

He seems... uncertain. Hesitant. And it doesn’t hit me until a few seconds later what he called me.

Rosemary.

Not Rose. Not Rosie.

There’s no teasing in his eyes today, either, none of that playful, irritating, devilish provocation I’ve come to know.

Because of me. Because of how I treated him yesterday.

“Hi,” I murmur, trying for an apologetic smile. “Do you have a minute?”

“Of course.”

He sets aside the tools he’s holding. I immediately feel guilty for interrupting him when I see the dismantled mechanical... *something* he was working on.

“You don’t have to stop what you were doing just because of me,” I say quickly. “If you’re busy, I can come back later and—”

“It’s no problem. I was just adjusting some of the pyrotechnics for tonight’s show.”

Now *that’s* a whole lot more interesting to me than it should be. “Really? You use fire in here?”

A pulse of wicked teasing in his eyes, a slight quirking up at the corners of his lips that loosens some of the tension between us.

“Of course,” he says, like it’s obvious. “This is Lucifer’s Parlor, after all. What would the Devil be without a little fire?”

“Show me?”

Renwick beckons me over and I crouch down beside him. “See here?”

It's something Odelia whipped up. Gives me a pretty impressive backdrop of flames for my show."

A black metal pipe runs along the baseboard, with a series of small openings where he explains that columns of non-incinerating flame shoot up at his command throughout his nightly performance.

"I'm sure you're quite a sight," I say, and Renwick grins at me.

"I certainly am. You should come and see me sometime."

When I glance over, he's closer than I expected, close enough for me to see all the textured ridges on his horns and the glint in his red eyes. Close enough to appreciate the wild, feral beauty of him and feel my heart rate tick up in response.

Standing, I loose a shaky breath and try to pull it the hell together. I was tangled up in a shade's shadows less than twelve hours ago; I don't need to be lusting over this demon, too.

Renwick stands as well, and the two of us lapse into a weighted, awkward silence. With our short small-talk reprieve over, everything unsaid between us feels heavier than ever.

"About yesterday," I begin, hesitantly. "During our training..."

Renwick runs a hand over one of his horns, a gesture that seems almost nervous, and his next words are rushed and filled with regret.

"I'm so sorry for how I acted, Rosemary. Pushing you like that. Making you use more magick than you were ready for. Making you feel—"

"No," I say gently. "It's alright. I agreed to Odelia's terms, and I knew what I was getting into training with you. *I'm* sorry. For freaking out and running away like that."

He shakes his head, not ready to let it drop. "Still, I shouldn't have pushed so hard. I shouldn't have made you—"

"Renwick." At my use of his name, he goes entirely still. "It's alright."

I hold out my hand. He glances down at it for a moment before taking it in his own, his huge palm and long fingers engulfing it completely.

"Truce?" I ask.

His smile returns and he squeezes my hand. "Truce."

The moment stretches long between us—skin to skin, eyes locked. The weight of the air and the hum of magick in the room remind me of the night I just spent with Silas. A sudden pulse of nerves trembles in the bottom of my stomach.

Is this wrong? Standing here with Renwick, enjoying the touch of his

hand on mine and the heat of him radiating between us?

Silas's words from last night rattle around in my brain.

Don't deny yourself any part of this world, Rosemary.

Does that include a tall, handsome, irritating demon with a scent like cloves and leather? Because standing here, close enough to feel the presence of him surrounding me, it's pretty damn hard to decipher what it all means. Me. Renwick. Silas. The choice I have to make and the reasons I have for making it.

Stepping back and dropping his hand, I take another steadying breath.

"So... the Parlor," I say, reaching for a new topic to pull me back from the ledge I'm standing on. "How long have you been performing this scene?"

Renwick's eyes sparkle like he can see right through me. "Just two years. Though I've been at the Acres for almost five."

"Really? And what brought you here?"

"Word of mouth. Other monsters who had wonderful things to say about Odelia and the whole Bramwell family. About the aid and support they've always given our community."

I consider that, taking a few steps away from him and studying the intricate details in the room. The dark carpets and the rich wood paneling, the bookshelves stocked with arcane tomes, the chandelier hanging over the center of the space draped with more cobwebs and burning with hypnotic black flame.

"And you've stayed this long," I murmur as I continue my circuit of the room.

"I'm loyal to this place and to Odelia because it's the only place I've ever belonged."

My gaze cuts sharply to his, and I find him watching me with keen speculation on his face, like he's waiting for me to say something bratty and argumentative.

"What do you mean by that?" I ask, genuinely curious.

His expression melts into one of approval, edged with relief that I'm finally not going to fight him on something.

"I mean that being here, working here, making a life here, it's better than the shadowed existence I knew before I came to Edgar's Acres. The existence so many monsters know before they find their place here."

There's a sincerity in his words, a quiet ferocity in his tone that makes me believe him without question.

It also makes me feel like that much more of an ass for how carelessly I've treated my time here, how I've had one foot out the door since the moment I arrived.

"You belong here too, Rosie. Whether or not you believe it."

The words, the name, all of it brings that tightening in my chest right back. I blink around the stinging in my eyes and nod at him.

"So, what do you say we do some more training?"

“Again.”

That damned word.

Again, again, again.

Renwick’s voice has been hounding me for a week now. Every single day before my shifts in the ticket booth, I’ve been working with him. He’s just as much of a hardass with me as he was the first time we trained together, and even though I want to be mad at him about it—scratch that, even though I *am* mad at him about it—I have to admit he’s getting results.

I’ve only engulfed the demon in flames two more times, and each day I have more control over my fire.

I’m not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but knowing I’m not going to accidentally incinerate my training partner has made it a lot easier to let myself go and lean into my power.

“There it is,” Renwick murmurs as he stands just behind me, hands lightly cupping my elbows. “You’ve got it?”

I give him a decisive nod and he steps away. I try not to miss the heat of him at my back and concentrate on keeping my flames under control.

“Just like last time,” Renwick coaches, keeping his voice low. “Extinguish the left, then swap with your other hand.”

He’s been training me to focus my flames, hone them, bend them to my will. Most of the time they still feel like they have a mind of their own, but each day it’s easier to get a grasp on the shape and the power of them.

I follow his command, winking out one flame, then the other, bringing them back in quick succession.

“Connect them.”

Again, the fire surges up to meet my will, bowing over me in a flaming arc.

“Good,” Renwick rumbles. “Very good.”

I shoot him a grin, then extinguish the flames completely. He steps forward and circles me with slow, predatory focus.

“You’re getting better,” he says—haughty, like he’s bestowing me an honor by deigning to give me his praise.

“Admit it,” I taunt. “I’m pretty badass.”

“Are you letting all that fire of yours go to your head, Rosie?”

“Maybe. And why shouldn’t I?” I’m still flush with the lingering remnants of my magick, riding an edge of daring giddiness as I glance over my shoulder at him. “What about you? Other than being exceptionally durable, what powers are you hiding?”

“Besides my winning personality and devastating good looks?”

I snort a laugh and wait for him to answer. He comes to stand in front of me, holds out a hand, and before I can blink he shifts it ever so slightly and a half-dollar sized medallion appears in his palm.

I stare down at the shining silver. “Magick tricks?”

“Hardly. I can access pocket realms. Not with as much skill or aplomb as some of my ancestors did, but enough.”

“Pocket realms?”

“The space between realms. Little folds of time and matter most creatures can’t access.”

I reach out to touch the medallion, but with another flick of his hand, it’s gone. Darting my eyes up to his, I’m caught by wickedly gleaming crimson.

At least until, just as fast as the medallion, Renwick disappears.

All I can do is gape at the emptiness where he was just standing, until a wave of warmth crashes over my back and two big hands land on my shoulders.

I gasp in surprise and whirl around to face him. “You can disappear, too? Like Silas?”

Renwick chuckles and shakes his head. “Not quite. Silas’s whole being disintegrates when he disappears. Think about my power more like stepping through a door into another room.”

“And what’s in the room?”

He shrugs. “Mostly nothing. Once upon a time, there might have been more my kind could access, but our power has waned through the generations. It does still help me put on one hell of a show in the Parlor, though.”

“Really? How?”

Another wicked grin as he leans in close. “You’ll have to come see me if you want to find out.”

“Maybe I will.”

“I certainly hope you will,” he murmurs. “But not tonight. You need to get to your shift before Odelia comes down here and cracks that whip of hers.”

We head for the door together, leaving the room in companionable silence and starting the climb out of the labyrinth.

“You’re coming to the bonfire tonight?” Renwick asks as we reach the top of the last staircase.

It’s Sunday night, just a couple of weeks before Samhain, and it’s the one day each week we close early. The staff usually gathers and cuts loose afterwards, though I’ve made it a point so far to stay away. No use making friends when I was so certain my time here was temporary.

Tonight, though...

I glance over at Renwick and find him watching me closely, something on his face that looks almost like... hope. It’s earnest and open, so much different from his usual wicked arrogance that I smother a laugh as I shrug.

“Maybe.”

“You should come,” he says, still with that earnestness in his voice. “You know you’re more than welcome.”

The way he says it, the idea that I could join in the fun, hang out with the beings I work alongside every day, talk and laugh and...

“I’ll think about it,” I say softly, and it seems to be good enough for him as he catches my hand and gives it a quick squeeze.

“Alright, Rosie. You do that.”

The bonfire burns brightly in the crisp October night as I make my way down the hill from the Acres to the clearing in the woods where the revelry is already in full swing.

Monsters and witches apparently know how to throw one hell of a party.

Besides the massive fire in the center of the clearing, the space is lit by hanging orbs of witchlight bobbing merrily over the partygoers. There’s a huge table filled with food and another laid out with beverages—strong ones, if the boisterous laughter and conversation filling the air are any indication.

There’s also a trio of fiddlers—a vampire, a witch, and Howard the gargoyle—set up on tree-stump seats and playing a lively tune to serenade the party.

Still feeling hesitant to jump right into the fray, I hang around the

outskirts of it all, passing up the drinks in favor of simply letting the magick of the evening wash over me. It's bubbly, buoyant, joyful, and I can't stop the smile that tugs at the corners of my mouth as I take it all in.

My eyes skate over the crowd, along the shadows at the forest's edge, but even without looking I know Silas isn't here.

I can't feel him. Not like I've been able to the last couple of times he's shown up on my doorstep.

I've spent two more nights with Silas since that first time. He always comes to me late, long past the midnight hour, when the dark magick of him on the other side of my door calls me to him like a magnet. Each time between us is better, a dance of shadows and pleasure, of starlight and flame.

But he's also always gone in the morning, and we haven't talked about what any of it means. We haven't talked about the fact that I'm still not showing any signs of being his anchor, or that he's interested in pursuing anything more than a quick autumn fling. And with the question of whether or not I'm staying at the Acres and what exactly I'm doing with Renwick still swirling somewhere just outside it all, for now it seems we're just going to keep things as they are.

No expectations, no commitments, and I don't know if that makes me grateful or guilty as I simultaneously scan the crowd for Renwick.

"Rose."

A voice from behind me draws my attention, and I turn to find Mira approaching.

She's wearing a long, flowy dress as black as her raven hair, and smiling softly as she comes to stand beside me.

"I'm glad you could make it."

I return her smile. "I am, too."

"I didn't know if you would after... well, I just wasn't sure if you would."

"After that super encouraging tarot reading you gave me?"

She laughs, and her smile turns a bit sheepish. "I wish we'd had more time to dive into it."

"So you could have explained how bad it really was?"

Mira shakes her head. "There are no bad readings. And no bad cards. There are only challenges and all the different ways spirit supports us through them."

I consider that for a moment. I've never been much of a student of the

tarot, but when she puts it that way...

“So I’m not cursed, then?”

“Definitely not cursed. Just at a crossroads, if I can presume to ask?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

Mira makes a soft noise of understanding as she thinks that over. “You might be surprised how spirit—or the universe, or the Goddess, whoever you believe governs such things—shows up to hold and support you at those crossroads.”

“Even when it gives me the Death card?”

“*Especially* when it gives you the Death card,” she says with another laugh. “No bad cards, remember? Death represents change, Rose. Inevitable, irrevocable, sometimes painful change, but just change when all is said and done. As much a part of life as anything else is.”

Mira looks like she’s going to say more, when something over my shoulder catches her eye.

“Remember that, alright?” She reaches out and gives my arm an encouraging squeeze. “And enjoy the party.”

She turns to go, and I’m about to call after her when another voice draws my attention.

“You came.”

A shiver races down my spine at that deep, familiar timbre, and I turn to find Renwick staring down at me with firelight flickering across his face.

Even though I haven’t been bold enough to come watch his show in the Parlor, looking at him now it’s easy to see him as precisely who he plays every night. Lucifer. A devil with the bonfire’s flames sparkling in his crimson eyes and temptation written over every muscled inch of him.

“Dance with me?”

The question catches me off guard, and all I can do is stare at him for a few long moments, not sure I heard him right.

“You want to dance?”

Those flames in his eyes burn hotter, and I let out a little squeak as he whips his tail up to band around my waist and tug me closer. I crash into his bare chest, bracing both my hands against him. His skin is warm, so warm, and my palms tingle with the spark of magick between us.

“Don’t tell me,” he says, smirking. “You don’t know how to dance?”

“I absolutely know how to dance.”

Well, kind of, I mentally amend as I look over at the couples twirling

around the clearing near the musicians. I'm not sure if there's much rhyme or reason to it, or if everyone is just caught up in the moment and letting the night carry them away.

"It's alright if you don't, Rosie. I'm more than comfortable leading."

His voice is low, intimate. He's still smirking, eyes glimmering with a wicked taunt, and it's enough to have me rising to meet his challenge.

I hold out a hand. "Fine. Let's see what you've got."

The expression that flashes across Renwick's face is equal parts surprise and satisfaction as he takes my hand and leads me into the crowd of revelers.

No one bats an eye at us or looks twice as he pulls me close with his other arm wrapped snugly around my waist and whirls me right into the dance. We're just one of the many couples lost in the music and moment. A jumble of humans and monsters and magick, everyone swept up by the joy of it all.

Renwick is... a pretty damn good dance partner, I have to begrudgingly admit. Just like with everything else this demon does well, he knows it and he's arrogant as hell about it without saying a word.

It's there, in the way he keeps me held firmly against him, the way he easily maneuvers us between the other couples, the way he's making us look so much more graceful than we would be if I was the one leading the dance.

And in the oh-so-satisfied grin on his face as he leans in close to murmur to me over the melody from the fiddlers.

"Are you ready to admit it?"

"Admit what?" I snap back, letting out a little gasp as he lifts me off my feet and whirls in a quick half-turn.

"You know what."

I roll my eyes, and apparently that's enough of an answer for him.

He leads me through two more songs. The way he's holding me has me all too aware of the warmth of him, the strength, how our bodies fit and sway together in a way that feels new and familiar all at once. Easy. Natural.

By the time the second song ends, a slow-building heat has broken out over my skin, and not just from the bonfire.

"I need a little air," I murmur as we spin to a stop. "Away from the fire. To cool off."

Renwick nods, eyes scanning my face.

"Come with me?"

All around us, other monsters and witches wander away from the light

of the fire as the night grows later and darker. In couples, trios, sometimes more, bodies press close and conversations drop to furtive whispers.

The flames have burned low, casting permissive shadows over it all, and the magick in the air seems to have shifted right with it. It whispers over my bare arms and down the back of my neck, an invitation and a warning all wrapped up in one.

“Alright, Rosie,” Renwick murmurs. “Let’s go get some air.”

It’s a paper-thin excuse, a knife’s edge we’re tiptoeing as we walk away from the light of the clearing and into the cover of the forest. The magick between us pulses and pulls, makes me want to huddle closer to his heat as the cool October air surrounds us.

“Fresh enough for you?” he asks a couple minutes later.

I stop in the middle of the path and glance around. We’re alone, no one else from the bonfire in sight, just the faintest hint of voices and music from the clearing.

Renwick stops, too, and looks me up and down. “I’m glad you came tonight, Rosie.”

“Are you?”

His gaze narrows a little as he answers. “Yes.”

“Why? I didn’t think you liked me all that much.”

All throughout our training sessions, we’ve constantly snarked and bitched at each other. It’s almost as much of a sport as the training itself, trying to one-up each other with each new bit of sass and sarcasm.

“Is that right?” he asks, leaning his enormous frame over me in a way I assume is supposed to be intimidating.

I take a few skipping steps away from him, further down the darkened path into the woods.

“You think I’m a brat,” I call over my shoulder.

When I catch his gaze, his eyes flare wide. He’s moving a moment later, following me into the darkness.

“You *are* a brat, Rosie. A brat with a bad temper and a smart mouth.”

A pulse of excitement races through me. Dark, sharp, provoking, a demon’s challenge I can’t resist.

“And you’re an arrogant ass,” I tell him, fully employing that smart mouth he accuses me of having.

“Yes,” he says, completely unapologetic. “And I think you like that.”

I come to a hard stop, hands on my hips. “You wish.”

“Yes, I do.”

Silence, and the implications of those three little words crash over me. My eyes are wide as Renwick takes a step toward me, then another, until he’s close enough to touch.

“What are you doing, Rose?” he asks, and all the challenge is gone from his voice, replaced by a soft warning. “What is it you want?”

What a question.

My head swims with the nearness of him and the intoxicating magick of the evening, with a pulse of apprehension over how confused I am about it all. About him. About Silas. About my place and my future here.

Renwick studies me thoughtfully, like he can see all of those thoughts tumbling around in my head. “I don’t want to ask anything of you that you don’t want to give, Rosie. And I know I’m not the... only option for you here.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No,” Renwick says simply. “I already told you I don’t believe in jealousy. And I also don’t think you should deny yourself the pleasure you want if you’ve been given permission to take it.”

The words send another pang of unease through me, considering what Silas already told me about not wanting me to feel bound to him. Have the two of them talked? Is this some part of whatever’s going on between them? An understanding that they can... share me?

“Funny. Silas said something similar about wanting me to explore all my options.”

Renwick goes absolutely still. “Did he, now?”

“Yes,” I tell him, throwing the word over my shoulder as I start back down the path, suddenly feeling the need to move again, restless energy coursing through my veins. “He did. Though it’s been pretty fucking hard for me to understand what either of you means.”

The heavy thud of Renwick’s booted footsteps follows me through the woods. When I glance back, my heart races at the look in his eyes. Heated. Predatory. Tracking my every step. It makes me walk even faster, magick skittering over my skin as we move deeper into the forest.

“What don’t you understand?” he growls as he stays right on my heels. “You must know by now how differently things work in this world than in the one you’re used to.”

I fight back a shiver. Yes, I understand. The heady allure of power and

magick. The freedom of this place, of living in a world filled with dark promise and temptation.

My blood is humming with anticipation as I reach another fork in the path. One branch leads deeper into the woods. The other loops back around to the staff village, to safety.

I whirl around to face him. We're both breathing hard, and his red eyes are alight with devilish intent, watching and waiting to see what I do next.

"What makes you think I'm ready to be part of that world?"

He grins as he answers. "Just look at you, Rosie. Brimming with magick and all those flames of yours. With powers you're only starting to scratch the surface of, powers you're already coming to embrace."

As he speaks, he takes my wrist in his grasp and turns my palm up, summoning his silver medallion from whatever pocket realm he keeps it in and dropping it into my palm.

"Isn't that right?" he challenges.

We've been training the flames first, since those were the most obvious threat, but as that magick has come easier, the rest has, too. I don't know how Renwick can sense it, but I hold his gaze steady as I levitate the coin just above my palm.

The telekinesis feels simpler, more manageable, something that's bent to my will with an ease that's been undeniably satisfying.

Renwick snatches the coin from the air and it disappears a moment later.

"See how well this place suits you?"

"And you think you know me that well? Maybe you're wrong. Maybe I've seen enough of this world and its irritating demons."

Renwick's eyes glow with wicked delight, body tense like a predator ready to chase after his prey. It sends a deep, dark thrill all the way down to the tips of my toes and a wave of flames through my veins.

"Such impertinence, witch. Perhaps I should punish you for having such a sharp little tongue."

All of it—the pull of my power and the spark of our banter, the temptation of the night surrounding us and the heat in his gaze—crests in me and burns up the rest of my hesitation.

"Only if you can catch me, demon."

With that, I run.

The rumble of Ren's laughter echoes through the woods as I dash away, but I don't hear his heavy footsteps or the crackle of autumn leaves that would let me know he's pursuing me.

No, after only a few short seconds all I hear is the tread of my own feet on the forest floor and the pounding of my heart in my ears, the rush of fast breath in my throat and the rustle of the branches I dart past.

Somehow, the silence is so much more frightening than Ren pursuing me would be. In the very darkest, most depraved, best way.

Alone in the woods, being hunted by a demon I can't see or hear—even though I *know* he's not going to let my little challenge go—my anticipation builds with every step. All that fear sends a pulse of electric, delicious excitement through me as I dash through the trees.

Where is he?

What's he going to do to me when he finds me?

What's the matter with me that I find this all so fucking hot?

Wind streams through my unbound hair, and the midnight air whispers dark taunts over my skin as I come to a skidding stop at a dead end in the path. In front of me, a giant, gnarled old oak tree stretches its night-black branches up toward the star-scattered sky.

I take a few moments to catch my breath, spinning in a slow circle as I try to orient myself.

At least until a sudden noise spikes my adrenaline again.

Whipping around, I find the demon standing right in the middle of the path, a savage grin on his face.

"You thought you could outrun me, Rosie?"

I gasp in surprise, and am just about to flee when Ren moves with inhuman speed, using another pocket realm to materialize right behind me.

He crushes me against his chest, one strong arm banding around my midriff and his other hand bracketing my throat. Not too tight, but just tight enough to let me know I'm not going anywhere.

“Very good effort, witch. But not quick enough.”

I give a good show of trying to struggle, but Ren just laughs at my half-hearted attempt to escape.

“Now,” he murmurs, dark and low and ominous, “I did say something about a punishment, didn’t I?”

His hand squeezes a little tighter at my throat, and when I arch into him I can feel the thick line of his erection pressing into my lower back. I do it again and he growls a warning against the side of my neck.

“Tell me to stop and I will, Rose. Anything you don’t want or enjoy, I stop.”

I nod, but it’s not quite enough for him.

“Tell me you understand.”

I bite back a moan at the low rumble of his voice and his firm, confident command that makes me ache to obey.

“I understand.”

“Good,” he croons. “I like a witch who knows how to behave.”

Struggling again at that bit of provocation, Ren’s chuckle vibrates against every place we’re touching, echoing all the way through me.

“Now for your punishment.”

My core goes molten at the sensual threat in those words, and my breath catches when Ren turns me in his arms and hefts me up against him. I scramble to wrap my legs around his waist and loop my arms around his neck as he walks us into the shadows of the enormous oak at the end of the path.

One of the tree’s great, sweeping limbs reaches out from the trunk at waist-height, making the perfect place for him to set me down.

And then he falls to his knees.

“Such a wicked little witch,” he murmurs, grabbing one of my ankles and tugging off my sneaker. “Such a wicked, *caught* little witch. My pretty, pretty prey.”

My other shoe follows, and he reaches up to undo the snap of my jeans.

I could try to run again. I could jump down and go careening off through the woods, lead him on another chase, but absolutely no part of me wants to do that.

I want to be Ren’s prey.

I want to be caught.

I want to be right here, letting a demon have his way with me. Like the obedient witch I have no problem being for him, I lift off the tree’s smooth

trunk to let him pull my jeans down my legs and toss them to the forest floor below us.

Standing again, he surveys me with dark satisfaction written all over his face. Shameless, I spread my legs wide and he's right there, pressing himself into me, the cool leather of his pants brushing up against my too-sensitive skin. Even with the thin barrier of my underwear, the sensation is incredible. I move on him, chasing my building pleasure with complete abandon.

Burying one hand in my hair, he winds my curls around his fist and tips my head back, making me meet his eyes.

"Beautiful," he rasps. "You submit to me so beautifully, Rosie."

If I felt anywhere near sane right now, I might fight back against that, too. I might snap at him that I don't submit, not to him, not to anyone, but that rational corner of my brain has gone strangely quiet.

"Hands up," Ren commands, and I obey that order too.

He reaches for the hem of my shirt, tugging it off and leaving it in a heap on the ground with the rest of my clothes. My bra goes next, leaving me completely bare for him except for my underwear.

Ren stares down at me with fires kindling in his deep red eyes and a sharp smirk growing wider on his face.

"Exquisite," he murmurs, leaning down to catch one of my nipples between his lips. "Just exquisite, Rosie."

Helpless to do anything but submit to the pleasure he's drawing from me, I arch into the sensation of his mouth, the firm grip of his hands, the irresistible heat of him.

Ren growls his satisfaction and snakes a hand down between my thighs. He brushes his fingers up, up, until he finds the heat of me and cups me over the already-damp fabric.

The groan he lets out sounds almost pained. "You've got more fire here for me, don't you Rosie? All this heat. All mine."

With deft fingers, he tugs my underwear off and I catch the briefest glimpse of him tucking them into his back pocket. Before I can give him any hell for that, though, his hand is back on me.

A hand which, I can't help but notice, has its claws filed down, like he was planning for this.

Despite the earlier frenzy of our chase, Ren's not in any hurry now. He takes his time exploring me, stroking along my damp seam and dipping just inside, making me arch up and cry out in a wordless plea for more. Bastard

that he is, he doesn't give me what I want. No, he keeps teasing and testing me, watching the expressions of pleasure and need breaking over my face, eyes lit in demon-bright arrogance.

"So responsive for me," he murmurs. "So eager for this, aren't you?"

I can't form any coherent words to answer him, especially not when he sinks two big fingers all the way into me. At the same time, he presses hard against my clit with the heel of his palm. I cry out and grind my hips into his hand.

"Gods, Rosie," Ren groans. "You feel like sin. So fucking tight and perfect."

He works his fingers in me, focusing in on my pleasure completely. But even while I'm melting into the sweet temptation of that abyss, something about his earlier taunting drifts forward in my mind.

"I thought this was supposed to be a punishment," I rasp, breathless.

Ren chuckles darkly. "It will be."

Before I can ask what he means, he presses more firmly against my clit. It's enough to have me crying out again, arching into the pleasure he's drawing from me, feeling the first waves of my orgasm crest and...

Ren pulls back, leaving me wanting and frustrated and shivering with the sudden rush of cool air against my skin.

"No!" I cry out as he takes a step away.

Even in the deep midnight darkness, I feel completely exposed. Especially when Ren steps sideways into another of his pocket realms and I'm left alone.

"No?"

The question breaks against my back a moment before I'm pressed up against Ren's broad chest. I yelp in surprise, but he's right there to swallow the sound in a deep, plundering kiss. It goes on and on, until a new sensation has me pulling away with a gasp and looking down.

Ren's thick maroon tail caresses its way up my leg. He leans over me and watches himself torture me inch by excruciating inch as it moves higher up my thigh toward my empty, wanting pussy.

When he gets to the crease at the top of my thigh and stops, I make a sound that's completely unintelligible. Something between a moan of protest and a garbled plea. And when he dips the blunted tip just inside, that noise turns into a broken groan.

I grasp at the arm he has banded around my waist, digging my nails into

him and squirming at the alien sensation of his tail in me.

“Relax, Rosie,” he commands, mouth trailing a line of biting kisses against my neck.

Relax? He wants me to relax?

I’m completely naked in the middle of the woods with a demon’s tail in my pussy, and he wants me to relax?

Moaning again, I shift restlessly against him and he clicks his tongue in disapproval.

“So impatient. And here I thought you were going to be a sweet, obedient witch for me.”

Again, the noise I make is nowhere near intelligible, but Ren has a little mercy on me as he pulls his tail out, then eases back in. Over and over, he works himself inside—stretching me, testing to see how much I can handle. He drops a hand to circle my clit and I rear back against him, pressing hard into his muscled chest.

It’s good, so damn good. And even though a distant part of my brain might be able to register just how absolutely fucking strange it is at the same time—being here, naked in the woods, letting a demon put his tail in me—it doesn’t matter. All that matters is me and Ren, the magick flowing between us, the pleasure he’s giving me. It builds higher and hotter, bringing me close, so close...

At least until he slides his tail out of me and disappears again.

With as pliant and shaky as all my muscles are right now, I almost topple backwards off the branch.

Just before I do, Ren reappears in front of me. He’s on his knees this time with his big hands on my thighs to keep me steady, and lets out a low, ominous laugh at my half-strangled scream of protest.

“Have you learned your lesson, Rosie?” he taunts, leaning in to nip at the over-sensitive skin of my inner thigh. “Have you learned what happens to wicked witches when they run?”

“Yes,” I groan, desperate to have his hands on me again, his tail, his tongue. Whatever he wants to give me, I’ll have it. Whatever will make him have mercy on me and let me come, I want it. I’ll say anything, do anything...

“Good,” Ren rumbles, then leans in even closer, bringing the ridged curve of his horn up against my pussy.

He rubs it over my clit once, twice, and again. Over and over until I

reach down to take both those horns in hand and angle him just the way I want.

“Yes, Rosie,” Ren groans, surrendering and letting me move him. “Take all the pleasure you need from me, witch.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I’m shameless, brazen as I rub myself on him, half out of my mind with the need racing through me. And when Ren shifts and finally puts his mouth on me, I’m nothing but greed and want—selfish, desperate. I clutch at his horns, thrust my hips into him, and his growl of approval echoes into my pussy.

I shatter a few moments later, waves of impossible pleasure breaking over me. Ren works me all the way through my orgasm—alternating between fucking me with his tongue and catching my clit between his lips in light, teasing sucks.

I whimper as I slide down from that peak, almost frustrated to have come so quickly.

My demon, though, isn’t done with me yet.

“That’s one,” he rasps against my core. “I want at least one more. To make sure you’ve learned your lesson.”

With that threat hanging in the air between us, he brings his tail up to plunge back into me while he works my clit with lips and tongue and teeth. I’ve barely recovered from my first climax when I feel the first tremors of my second. It’s too much—too much pleasure, too much heat—more than my body can possibly—

“One more, witch,” Ren says again.

“I ca—”

“Don’t you dare finish that word. One more.”

With another strangled cry, I surrender. To Ren, to the magick between us, to the fire in my veins. My climax hits hard and fast and vicious, ripping through my body with enough force to pull a low scream from my throat.

Ren moves, standing and pulling me into the hard wall of his body, keeping me upright as I go completely boneless. He strokes a soothing hand up and down my back, pressing his lips to the top of my head and speaking softly into my hair.

“Easy, Rosie. Keep a handle on all that power of yours.”

I don’t understand what he means, at least not until I pry my heavy eyes open and blink in confusion at the glowing light surrounding us.

Embers, a whole cascade of them, tumble down around us like so many fireflies. The forest floor is damp enough that they sputter harmlessly out as they fall, and I stare in wonder at their glow.

“Did I do that?”

“Yes.” Ren leans in to snag my lips in a quick kiss. “Though I’m going to take at least half the credit for it.”

Laughing softly, I nestle into his chest. I close my eyes and reach down deep for the spark of my power to concentrate on reeling it back in. It’s easy enough to manage, even with as pleasure-drunk as I feel right now, and when I open them again the last of my embers blink out into the darkness.

“I don’t think I’m going to be able to walk back,” I groan.

The demon doesn’t seem to mind as he keeps stroking my back, keeps running his lips over my hair, my cheeks, catching my mouth in gentle half-kisses.

It’s... nice. And strange. I’m not really sure what to do with all this tenderness from him, but I decide not to question it as he helps me back into my clothes and swings me up into his arms.

When we reach my cottage, he sets me down on unsteady feet. I’m about to ask if he wants to come inside, strip off those leather pants of his and let me show him I’m a witch with some other talents he might enjoy, but Ren speaks before I can.

“I want you to have a big glass of water and something to eat before you go to bed,” he says, nodding toward the door. “And a bath, or at least a quick shower, if you’re too tired.”

For my magick drain, I realize.

And even though he doesn’t need to be worried—aside from some orgasm-induced wobbliness, I feel great right now—his concern puts a warm, syrupy feeling smack in the center of my chest.

I smile up at him. “Don’t you want to...”

My words trail off and I step closer, brushing my fingertips over the hard line of his erection where it’s straining the front of his pants.

Though a rough, needy noise rasps its way out of his throat, Ren steps back and shakes his head.

“Not tonight.”

I frown at the refusal and am about to open my mouth and argue the point when he leans in and kisses me again.

“Water. And food. And a bath,” he murmurs against my lips. “You need

your strength to keep training tomorrow.”

I let out an irritated breath. “Fine.”

Looking entirely pleased, and not like I’m sending him home with a big, aching hard-on and no relief, Ren kisses me one last time before stepping away.

“Goodnight, Rosie.”

“Goodnight,” I murmur, leaning against one of the wooden posts on my porch and watching the demon disappear into the night.

The next couple of weeks pass in an exhausting blur.

Between training with Ren, working the ticket booth, and trying to manage the relationships I'm having with not one but *two* monsters, I barely have time to keep my head on straight, let alone come to any kind of decision about my future as Samhain approaches.

Things between Ren, Silas, and me... well, things between the three of us are just the same. Which is to say that despite my growing connection with them both, neither one has tried to pry or find out what's happening on the other side of this little triangle we've created.

All of it feels... precarious. Like it can't last much longer.

At the same time, no part of me feels ready to let either of them go.

That's more true than ever when Silas has me pinned to the wall just inside my front door a week before Samhain. His shadows—stronger and more tangible than ever—take me apart piece by piece, strip me bare and keep me bound as he has his slow, decadent way with me.

When I'm moaning and writhing against the touch of his darkness, when I'm breaking into a million starlit pieces, none of it seems to matter. All that matters is being here, right here with him.

The next afternoon, when Ren's red eyes are glowing in warm approval as we take my pyrotechnics up to the Parlor to practice, that feels right, too. The way he lays me down on the plush red velvet sofa and devours me, the way my blood burns at the wildness of him, it makes me want to reach out and take it.

All of it. Both of them. For as long as they'll have me.

But we don't talk about it. As the moon grows fuller each night and the crackling power of the Acres waxes with it, it all feels like it's coming to its inevitable breaking point.

What that breaking point will be, I don't know, and I'm too caught up in the overwhelm of it all to be able to make sense of any of it.

"You'll be with Renwick on Samhain night. Performing in the Parlor."

My head snaps up where I'm sitting on my front porch, enjoying a few minutes of afternoon sunshine with a book three days before Samhain.

Odelia's standing there, arms crossed over her chest and a stern expression on her face, looking like she's ready to fight back against whatever protests I'm going to make.

Which, I mean, isn't necessarily wrong of her. But still irritating that she knows exactly how I'm going to respond.

"What? You're fine with me barbecuing your guests?"

Odelia snorts. "By the way Renwick tells it, that doesn't seem to be much of a concern."

Ren is still reporting to her? Pushing aside my curiosity over what he's been saying about me, I shake my head.

"I mean, yeah, I've gotten a lot better at controlling the flames, but—"

"Fantastic. Then you and Renwick should do spectacularly together."

For a few long moments, all I can do is gape at her. What she's suggesting is... insane. Truly. It makes a lick of fear curl up my spine, right alongside a matching lick of anger.

"I am absolutely not going to—"

"This is part of my terms, Rosemary," she interrupts me again. "If you're going to stay here, to be a part of all this, you need to push yourself a little more."

"Push myself? Like I haven't already been—"

"What you and Renwick have been doing is magick with training wheels. It's time to challenge yourself."

I swear to the Goddess and spirit and whatever other deities might be watching, if this cantankerous old witch interrupts me one more time—

"So you'll be with him on Samhain. In the Parlor. I'd suggest you get as much practice between now and then as you can."

Ren and I have already been practicing in the Parlor, and we've even been running through a few ideas that might be cool for the show. Next year's show. When I'm not still so new to my power, when I've had some more time to train it.

Well, if I'm still here next year, anyway.

"I'm not ready."

Even though the words come out weak and pathetic, they're nothing but the truth. I'm not ready, not strong enough.

"You're ready."

For a few moments, Odelia and I stare each other down. Two pairs of identical dark eyes. Two Bramwell wills clashing against each other.

“And if I charbroil an unsuspecting guest?”

“You won’t.”

Where she’s getting all of this certainty from, I don’t know. Wherever it is, though, what I wouldn’t give to be able to draw on a little of it as well.

I open my mouth to argue some more, but Odelia beats me to the punch.

“I’ll inform Renwick. And I look forward to seeing what kind of magick the two of you can make on Samhain.”

With that, she turns on her heel and walks away, leaving me staring after her.

My stomach is in knots as Samhain evening falls.

I'm on with Ren in an hour, and as I leave my cottage and trudge up the hill toward the Acres for what might be the last time, I try to convince myself not to turn and run in the other direction.

Maybe it's what Odelia wants me to do.

Maybe putting all this on me was meant to force my hand and get me to pack my shit and get out. Maybe she didn't want to be the one to make the call.

Or maybe it's just reverse psychology, and she's hoping it'll piss me off enough to stay out of spite.

With Odelia, who the hell knows?

Letting out a frustrated breath, I make myself stop trying to guess at my aunt's machinations. I've just reached the front gates when I feel a familiar darkness beside me.

"Hi Silas," I say with a small smile. Just having him near clears away some of the storm clouds of my bad mood.

"Hello darling."

My heart stutters at the sound of those words in his midnight-silk voice, of the gentle tenderness in his tone. And at the accompanying pang of guilt in my stomach.

Because it's not just my magick and my future at Edgar's Acres I have to make a decision about today.

This can't go on any longer. Whatever's happening between me and Silas, between me and Ren, between the three of us. One way or the other, it has to be decided tonight, too.

If I stay, we need to be honest and open with each other and figure everything the hell out. If I go, I need to end things with as little damage as I can.

"How are you feeling?" Silas asks, brushing a shadow soothingly up and down my arm as we walk.

All that comes out in reply is a disgruntled groan.

“That bad?”

“No,” I say in a huff of breath. “I’m... well, I actually don’t know what I am.”

We reach the manor, and Silas curls two shadows around my shoulders, turning me to face him.

“You’re going to do wonderfully tonight, darling.”

“Yes, she is.”

Silas and I both turn to find Renwick striding down the manor’s front steps.

He’s in his full Lucifer’s regalia. Tight leather pants slung low across his hips and fastened by a silver goat’s head belt buckle. A silver pentagram medallion laying against his bare chest. A sumptuous black cloak draped over his shoulders.

It’s certainly a look, and on anyone else it would probably come across as corny, but on Ren... holy hell.

I’m not sure who’s staring more blatantly, me or Silas, as Ren stops just in front of us at the bottom of the stairs with his legs braced wide and his arms crossed over his sculpted chest. His crimson eyes rove back and forth between the two of us, and my momentary brain-melt over just how fucking hot he is passes.

This is the first time the three of us have been together in weeks.

The tension in the air grows heavier as the two of them seem to remember that fact, too. Ren catches Silas’s eye, and for a few long moments it’s like I’m not even here. They stare each other down, both their gazes intense and unreadable as they share a silent conversation I can’t even begin to translate.

The moment breaks when a couple of harpies approach and brush past us to head inside.

Ren recovers first, shaking his head and glancing over at me with a sharp grin.

“Ready to sell your soul to the devil, Rosie?”

I give him an insolent once-over. “Looking like that? I don’t know, I think you’ll need another couple gallons of baby oil smeared across your chest, maybe some nipple rings to go with your—”

My words cut off on a squeak as Ren catches me around the waist with his tail and drags me up against him. He curls a hand over my jaw and

presses his thumb against my lips to shut me up.

“Enough sass, witch. Let’s go.”

Behind me, Silas chuckles. It’s such a surprise given how awkward and tense everything still feels that I whip my head around to look at him.

Silas catches my confused look and shrugs. “You should listen to him. I’d worry for the state of your soul if you don’t.”

Ren lets out his own low rumble of laughter, and for a few moments I’m stunned. I look at one, then the other, then back again in quick succession, trying to understand what’s going on here.

“Later,” Ren says, taking me by the chin and turning my face back toward his. “We’ll talk about it later.”

Even though I’m burning with curiosity over it all, I nod my agreement. I need to focus. I need to get my damn head on straight so I don’t accidentally roast someone tonight.

“I would wish you luck,” Silas says. “But I have a feeling you don’t need it.”

“Thanks,” I tell him. “I’ll try to believe you.”

With one last reassuring smile, he disappears into the twilight, leaving me and Ren alone.

Still holding me firmly in his arms, Ren grins down at me.

“Well, witch, how about it? Ready to make some magick?”

The pillars of my flames fade in the Parlor, accompanied by the sounds of shocked awe, delighted fright, and gasps of surprise. As the room is plunged into darkness, Ren's low, ominous voice rises like a dark caress.

"So many souls ripe for the taking," he murmurs, moving through the set unseen. "So many to be reaped into my realm."

Standing just out of sight behind a curtain and following the cues we've spent the last three days going over and over, I start a slow lick of flame near Ren's feet, just enough to cast him in a dim, demonic glow.

"Whose shall I take first?"

The flames disappear, and he steps into a pocket realm, only to reappear with another bright flare of my fire. The group of guests shriek in surprise, scrambling to the other side of the room.

I keep the flames completely controlled, completely contained, feeding off Ren's magick, the guests' emotions, and the crackling hum of power that wends its way all throughout the Acres tonight.

It's... wonderful. This power. The feel of it burning through my veins. The pulse of bone-deep certainty that I'm the one who wields it, I'm the one whose will it bends to.

"Delicious," Ren croons. "Your fear is delicious, mortals."

I hold back a wave of laughter at his dramatics, and catch his eye for a moment as I shower him in sparks. There, in the gleam of his crimson gaze and the twitches at the corners of his lips, is the smallest break in character that lets me know he's enjoying this just as much as I am.

The scene goes on for a bit like that—taunting and frightening and delighting the guests—until it builds into a crescendo with Ren in the center of the room, surrounded by my fire.

"Go, now," he hisses to the crowd. "Lest you find yourself caught forever in hellfire, my loyal servants for eternity."

The harpy who's serving as the usher for this group catches my eye. With a brief nod, I extinguish my flames and throw the room into darkness as

the guests scurry out.

They're our last guests coming through tonight, and when the heavy wooden door closes behind them, I let out a long, relieved breath. I send a few spare flames around the room to light the candles on the sideboard and in the hanging chandelier above.

As I do, it hits me, really hits me.

I did it.

I made it through tonight completely in control of my magick. I didn't hurt anyone. I didn't make any mistakes.

I did it.

I let out a giddy, stunned laugh and Ren is right there, taking me by the shoulders and turning me to face him.

"Rosie," he says, a huge grin spreading on his face and pride burning in his eyes. "You were—"

"Wonderful?" I say, laughing again. "Perfect? Badass?"

"All of that and more, witch. You must have had an excellent teacher."

I roll my eyes and am about to give him some more sass, when he leans down and catches my lips in a fast, hard kiss. It's a kiss that soon turns deeper, darker, more insistent.

At least until Ren pulls away, breathing hard. "There's something else you need to do tonight, Rosie."

I nod, knowing exactly what he means.

I need to talk to Odelia. I need to make my choice.

"I'll find you after?" I ask him, and he gives me one more brief kiss before nodding toward the door.

"Go," he says, eyes alight with encouragement.

Making my way out one of the side staff entrances, I cross quickly to the admin building. The light shining from beneath Odelia's office door lets me know she's inside, and a steady certainty settles on my shoulders as I raise my hand.

At my decisive knock, Odelia calls out from inside. "Come in."

She doesn't look surprised in the slightest to see me. As she leans back in her chair and folds her hands in front of her, her knowing expression says 'I told you so' without her having to utter a single word.

And fine, she's won. I'm so ready to accept her offer that I'm only slightly annoyed by how smug she's probably going to be about it.

"I'm in."

“In for...” she starts, then trails off, waiting for my complete surrender. And I’m more than willing to give it.

“Everything. All of it. Whatever help I can give to all the witches and monsters at the Acres. I want to stay and be a part of it all.”

“Good. Take a seat and let’s talk.”

And just like that, it’s settled. All that certainty, that acceptance, the intuitive knowledge I’ve just set myself off down the path I was always meant for, it all sets down on my shoulders like a warm blanket as I take my seat across the desk from her.

We talk for a few minutes about what it all will entail, me coming on to the Acres full-time. There will be an adjustment period, of course, time for me to find my place and for the rest of my kin to decide where my talents will best be spent.

In the meantime, I can stay in my cottage and continue my life here. Start putting down some roots that just might stick.

“And I’ll expect you to continue your training,” Odelia says. “Fire-wielding, telekinesis, and... alchemy. If you decide it’s something you want to explore.”

For a few long seconds, I can’t answer her. Alchemy. The kindled embers of my father’s power in my blood, the magick I haven’t yet been brave enough to touch.

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” I murmur.

“Well,” Odelia says. “You might begin right over there.”

She nods to one of the curio cabinets at the side of the room, and my breath catches in my throat when I follow her gaze and realize what I’m looking at.

Alchemy tools.

My father’s alchemy tools.

I’d recognize them anywhere. The iron cauldron inlaid with golden runes. The leather-bound grimoire which contains his decades of carefully curated knowledge. I never knew what happened to any of my father’s things after he died, and I’d never been brave enough to ask my mother if there was anything of his I could have kept.

“How?” I whisper as I stand from my chair and step over to the cabinet. “How did you get these?”

I run my fingertips over the lip of the cauldron and almost imagine I can feel the faint thrum of his power still woven into the metal.

“I took them from his workshop,” Odelia says, the barest hint of emotion putting a slight quaver into her voice. “I kept them for you, if you ever wanted them.”

Grief closes around my throat like a fist, but I swallow past the lump as I turn back to Odelia.

“Not... not yet,” I tell her. “But someday.”

She seems to find that an acceptable answer as she stands and walks out from behind her desk and takes my shoulders in a light grip.

“Whenever you’re ready,” she says, understanding sparkling in her dark eyes, my father’s dark eyes, my dark eyes.

She’s still Odelia, though, so the tender moment only lasts a few seconds before she releases my shoulders and goes back to sit down behind her desk.

“Rest up,” she says. “And take a couple days off. We’ll start working on getting everything sorted on Monday.”

“Alright,” I say, heading for the door. “Enjoy the rest of your Samhain, Odelia.”

She mumbles her own goodbye and waves me off, already turning her attention back to whatever important matters she’s got laid out on her desk. I’ve just reached the door when a wry smile tugs at the corners of my lips.

“And thanks,” I tell her, glancing back over my shoulder. “For trusting me enough not to barbecue any of our guests.”

A flash of... *something* crosses Odelia’s face. An expression tight and strange enough to have me turning back around, suspicion rising in my gut.

“What?” I ask.

Is it... guilt? No. Not possible. Odelia Bramwell is not capable of looking guilty.

“I...” she starts, bracing both her hands on the desk. “There may have been...”

“There may have been *what*,” I prompt, but I’m pretty sure I already know what she’s getting at.

“Look, Rosemary,” Odelia says, all business again. “They were just... a few wards. Some fire suppressants to make sure—”

Improbable, unstoppable laughter bubbles up in my throat, and before she can finish, I’m doubled over with it. Giggling uncontrollably, it takes a few moments for me to get enough air to answer her.

“Oh, my god,” I say, still wheezing. “I *knew* you weren’t that insane. I

mean, yeah, you're insane. But I'm glad you'd draw the line at incinerating some humans."

I think I see the corner of Odelia's lip twitch, but it must just be a play of the candlelight.

"At any rate," she says. "It would seem those precautions were unnecessary. I knew you and your demon would do spectacularly, and you did."

I raise an eyebrow. "My demon? What makes you think—"

"Please, Rosemary. What did I tell you about being able to sense Bramwell family magick? You didn't think I'd notice all those little power spikes when you were getting up to whatever it is you've been doing with the demon and the—"

"Alright, alright," I say, holding my hands up in surrender. "Noted. I'm going to do a better job of keeping a lid on things."

"You do that," she says curtly, then nods toward the door. "And enjoy the rest of your night."

The way she says it, with a sparkle in her eye that almost seems like teasing, makes me laugh again as I give her a little wave and head out of her office.

Striding down the hallway, it hits me.

I've chosen. I'm staying. I'm a Bramwell witch of Edgar's Acres and this is the path I've set myself on.

The certainty of that choice courses through me with a steady determination and a reminder of the other choice I still have to make.

The one I'm going to make *tonight*.

Now I just need to find my demon and my shade.

I leave the admin building and head for the stairs down into the labyrinth. There are a few staff locker rooms and offices on the first floor below the manor, and I figure that's as good a place as any to start looking.

Walking down the first long hallway, I glimpse stone-grey wings disappearing behind a corner up ahead.

"Howard!" I call out. "Wait up."

Rounding the corner, I find him standing there with a wide smile splitting his stony face.

"Hi Rose. I heard things went well in the Parlor tonight."

I smile back, flushed with pride. "They did. And, speaking of, I was wondering if you've seen Renwick around anywhere?"

Howard's smile slips a little before he nods toward one of the staff offices. "I think I saw them headed in there."

Them?

Thanking him, I turn toward the door he indicated while he continues on his way to wherever he was going. Just as I'm about to reach for the handle, a wave of magick breaks over my skin. Something like static and starlight, like electricity and darkness. It should be enough to give me pause, but before I have time to think better, I ease the door open.

The first thing I see is Ren. Or, well, at least little bits and pieces of him. My mind stutters over what I'm seeing, trying to make sense of it.

His head, thrown back in tortured ecstasy.

His pants, shoved roughly down around his thighs.

His hands, braced on the desk behind him, crumpled in the papers scattered there.

The rest of him is cloaked in familiar tendrils of shadow, all gathered between his spread legs, bobbing in a slow, rhythmic motion that has the demon groaning in pleasure.

Silas is here. With Renwick. The two of them are... are...

My hand slips, and when the brass handle creaks, everything in the room goes still. Ren's eyes fly open and his head snaps up. All those shadows pull back, giving me a clear view of his stiff, weeping cock and leaving absolutely no question about what's going on here.

"I..." I start, face flushing, voice shaking. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I didn't know..."

Confused, embarrassed, overwhelmed, I flee the office. As I run, Ren lets out a strangled curse.

"Rose," he calls after me. "Wait!"

But I'm not stopping. I'm not slowing down as I make my way through the familiar warren of hallways and up the main stairs into the night beyond. I don't wait for a moment as I flee the manor and dash through the grounds, not caring that the few cast members still milling around give me strange glances as I pass.

"Darling." Silas's voice is strained and breathless as a few of his shadows reach for me. In the midnight darkness, they're darker still, stroking searchingly against my skin.

But even for him, I don't stop. I'm choking on my mortification and confusion. I need to be back in the peace and privacy of my cottage so I can

try to make sense of what just happened.

I make it all the way to the path through the woods before I hear another voice.

“Rose!” Ren’s shout booms behind me, but still I don’t slow down.

As his heavy footsteps gain on me, I pull on a bit of my power. I know the long, tangled root I ripped out of the dirt found its mark around his ankle when I hear the solid thud of his body hitting the ground.

“Fuck!” Ren groans as he falls. “Godsdamn it, you’re getting good at that.”

It gives me the time and distance I need to make it back to my cottage, to slam the door behind me and lock it, shutting both of them out.

In the silence of my cottage, my panicked, spiraling thoughts crowd in around me. They take up all the air in the room and climb up the back of my throat until I'm nearly choking on them.

Ren and Silas. Ren and Silas are... involved. At least in some capacity. And like an idiot, I had no idea.

I asked, didn't I? And Silas said they weren't. Or, at least, he implied they weren't...

But that's all we've been doing, haven't we? Implying things that may or may not be true and okay. Not having the conversations we should have had a long, long time ago.

So maybe the two of them are together, but none of us had any kind of understanding. There were no promises made or broken, nothing that would have meant...

My spiral of thoughts stutters, then pauses completely as a wave of magick breaks over my skin.

It only takes a few moments for me to recognize the magick, Silas's magick, waiting just on the other side of my locked door. Renwick's heavy footsteps echo on the porch stairs a few seconds later, and even though I'm pretty sure both their powers make it so they could come in if they really wanted to, they don't push their luck.

I hear them speaking softly to each other, too softly for me to make out what they're saying, followed by a quiet knock.

"Rosie?" Ren's muffled voice is weighted with concern. "Can we talk to you?"

I don't want to open the door. Not right now. Not with as emotionally wrecked as I feel. But knowing I owe both of them an explanation, knowing the three of us finally, finally have to talk this out, I take a deep, trembling breath and reach for the handle to ease it open.

"There she is," Ren murmurs as one of Silas's shadows reaches forward, only to stop just short, like he's not sure he's allowed to touch me.

Both their reactions, the fact that they're not mad or looking at me like the dumbass I feel like right now, makes another lump of emotion settle itself squarely over my vocal cords.

"Hi," I whisper, and Silas does touch me this time, a soft brush of darkness against my cheek.

Ren stays right where he is, and my gaze darts back and forth between them filling my doorway.

"I'm sorry," I say, voice hoarse and raspy. "I didn't mean to... I didn't know."

"Rosie," Ren says. "It's not what you think it—"

"It's... it's fine. If the two of you are together. We didn't... there wasn't any kind of..."

Ren is shaking his head before I've even finished speaking. "I'm sorry, Rose. We should have talked about all of this a long time ago. We just... didn't want to overwhelm you. Or put any pressure on you. Not when you already had enough you were trying to figure out."

"But the two of you are already together. And here I am, coming in and pursuing you both like an idiot, not knowing—"

"We're not together," Silas says gently.

"You're not? Because what I saw back inside the labyrinth looked a hell of a lot like—"

"A brief loss of sanity," Silas interrupts again, shifting uncomfortably as he glances at Ren. "A few moments of indulgence we never should have given into before we spoke with you."

"But before... the two of you were together before."

Ren and Silas share a guilty look before Ren answers.

"And we've been dancing around each other for the past five years, not talking about it."

Despite myself, a weak laugh wrenches from my throat. "We're all pretty good at that, aren't we?"

It lightens the mood a little, and we share a couple of seconds of guilty silence before something else that's been nagging at the back of my mind slips out.

"So, have the two of you been talking about me? Planning all of this out?"

Ren gives his head a decisive shake. "No. We wouldn't disrespect you like that. We only..."

“Only what?”

“We decided we wouldn’t get in each other’s way,” Silas says, regret clear in his tone. “After everything that happened between us, I didn’t want to get between you and Ren if there was a chance the two of you might have been happy together.”

Ren huffs a humorless laugh. “And I didn’t want to deprive *you* of an anchor, if that’s what you thought Rosie was to you.”

I swallow painfully and turn to Silas. “It’s never mattered to me that I’m not your anchor. It doesn’t change the way I feel about you.”

“It’s never mattered to me, either,” Ren murmurs.

Silas looks back and forth between us. “I owe both of you an apology. For the way I’ve kept myself at arm’s length. For pushing you both away when I should have... when we all could have been...”

His words send a fresh round of painful emotion surging up in my chest.

“I’m sorry, too,” I say.

“Make that three,” Ren chimes in with a wry edge in his voice.

Another beat of silence, and though all our apologies are hanging in the air, there’s a question hanging there, too. One I know we need to figure out the answer to.

“So what do we...” I start, not sure how I want to ask it. “Are the two of you... and how do I... what is all of this?”

“Both of us, Rosie,” Ren says in a breathless rush. “You can have both of us, if you want. The three of us can all be together.”

Simple. So simple, when he says it like that.

Can it really be that simple?

I look to Silas for confirmation.

“It’s up to you, darling,” he says, a tendril of darkness curling around my cheek.

Just like it did outside Odelia’s office, my decision comes to me immediately. Certain and steady, the answer to a question that never needed to be asked.

“Yes,” I say, leaning into Silas’s shadow and reaching out to take Ren’s hand. “Yes. I want both of you.”

Before I can react, Ren uses the hold I have on him to tug me into his arms and against his broad chest. He plunges his other hand into my hair and cradles me close, leaning down to run his lips over the top of my head.

“Rosie,” he says in an emotion-thick whisper.

A sharply indrawn breath pulls my attention from Ren. I glance over his shoulder, and the whole world seems to come to a standstill.

Standing there, as whole and solid and real as Ren and I, is... Silas.

“Silas.”

Stepping out of Ren’s embrace, I brush gently past him, eyes wide at the sight in front of me.

Silas—whole, real, *here*.

My hands shake as I run them over his chest, his shoulders, hold his face between them and stare up at him in shocked awe.

Silas in his corporeal form is... wondrous.

With his shadows cleared away, he gleams like a star.

Golden blond hair falls in a messy tumble as he runs his fingers through it, down the side of his face and lower still to cup my hand where it rests on his jaw, like he can’t quite believe he’s real, either.

He’s otherworldly handsome with sharp, refined features, eyes such a pale blue they’re nearly silver, and a sinfully full mouth I’m aching to kiss.

I don’t know if it’s too much for him, if he needs some time to adjust, so I run my thumb over the pad of his bottom lip.

“Can I?”

His breath hitches and his eyes widen, but he gives me a brief, jerky nod. Those full lips part on a gasp when I brush mine against them, and Silas goes utterly still for a few moments before he kisses me back.

Eager hesitance and trembling need, a sweet brush of moonlight against my skin. Silas tastes familiar and irresistible, like decadent darkness, like *mine*.

“You’re beautiful,” I whisper, breaking the kiss and laying my head on his chest. “You’re beautiful, Silas.”

He wraps his arms around me, and the hum of his magick is still there. More solid, more real, but still Silas. Still the shade I’ve fallen for.

“I never imagined it would be like this,” he rasps. “Being able to hold someone. Being able to touch. I didn’t expect... I never...”

Burrowing closer to him, I inhale the scent that’s still so familiar—moonlit dew and crisp autumn frost, the slightly sweet tang of fallen leaves.

“Sy,” Ren says roughly behind me, and I step aside so he can embrace Silas, too.

He grasps the back of Silas’s neck, tugging him forward into a rough-tender kiss.

I watch for a few moments, uncertain if I should turn away to give the two of them some privacy. Ren breaks the kiss with a groan and reaches for me again to tug me into their embrace.

“You did this, Rose. This is because of you.” Ren’s voice is warm and soothing against the back of my neck. His hands skim over my hips and he presses closer, enveloping me completely between my two monsters.

“How?” I ask, tilting my head to nuzzle against his shoulder. “How did I do it?”

“A question for the Goddess or spirit or whoever governs such things.”

“Whatever the case,” Silas cuts in, cradling my face in his hands and turning it up to look at him. “I am blessed to have found you, my own darling. We both are.”

His lips find mine as Ren grazes his teeth over the side of my throat. The combined force of their attention and the magick swirling between us makes my blood race and a warm, urgent heat spread from my belly outwards.

It’s a hungry flame, a need so sharp it takes my breath away. I gasp into Silas’s kiss and he takes the opportunity to press his advantage. His lips open over mine and his tongue strokes deep, teasing me, coaxing me, drawing a broken moan of pleasure and want from the back of my throat.

Ren growls, grasping me tighter and pushing his hips into me so I can feel the hard line of his erection pressing into my lower back.

Without hesitating, without giving myself time to second-guess or over-think or wonder how all of this is going to work between the three of us, I simply let myself feel. I let myself move, grasping for the door handle and swinging it open.

My monsters catch my intent immediately. Silas reaches down, grabs my ass with both hands, and pulls me up against him. I let out a little yelp of surprise as I wrap my legs around his waist and devour his answering chuckle with a sharp nip against his bottom lip.

We all step into the front room of my cottage, dark except for the light of the full moon shining through the windows. The air is charged with magick and anticipation as I lean in close and drag my teeth along the strong column of Silas’s throat, making him groan.

He sets me back on my feet, and then there are two sets of hands on me, two pairs of lips, two strong, warm bodies pressed up against mine. I'm greedy for them both, grabbing a toned bicep here, dragging my fingers through a thick head of golden hair there, grasping and taking and begging for more without saying a word.

But Renwick apparently has enough words for all of us as he maneuvers us toward the couch and puts a hand on Silas's shoulder, silently commanding him to sit. Then he turns to me with wicked provocation sparkling in his crimson eyes.

"On your knees for our shade, witch. It's long past time he was properly worshiped."

A shiver of anticipation runs through me, and magick hums along my skin. My body suddenly feels too small to contain everything I'm feeling, too antsy and restless, stretched taut and ready to break.

"While I'm still wearing so many clothes?" I ask Ren, arching a brow.

He growls low in his throat and lunges for me, but instead of ripping my black dress off like I might have expected, he stops. Turning me in his arms so I'm facing Silas, Ren addresses the shade directly.

"Do you want to see our Rosie?" he asks, toying with the buttons running down the back of the dress.

Silas nods, silver-blue eyes glowing in the moonlight as he watches with rapt attention.

"Such a pretty witch, isn't she? Even prettier once all these clothes are gone."

The way he's speaking, the rumble of his words against my back, the breath of cool air that washes over my skin with each button undone, all of it makes my pulse leap and my pussy ache.

He slides the dress down my shoulders, revealing the bra I'm wearing beneath. Silas's gaze grows sharper, hungrier, as Ren exposes me to him inch by inch.

"Lace?" Ren murmurs into my ear, and I shiver again. "You were planning for this, weren't you, witch? You knew exactly what you wanted when you put this on."

He's not wrong, but all I can do is whimper helplessly as my dress drops to pool around my feet.

"Goddess, Rosemary," Silas breathes, taking in the sight of my black lace bra and a barely there thong to match. He palms his cock over his pants

as he looks, and Ren chuckles into the back of my neck.

“Look at what you do to him, Rosie. Look how hard he is for you already.”

He toys with the clasp of my bra as he speaks, and a heartbeat later that falls away, too, leaving me in nothing but my panties.

“Let him do the last of it,” Ren urges, giving me a nudge forward.

I step to where Silas is sitting and he shifts forward to meet me. Standing between his thighs, I run a hand through his hair and grasp lightly, tipping his head back so he has to look at me. His hands settle on my hips, tugging me even closer as he slides his fingers under the straps of my thong.

“Rosemary,” he whispers.

“Silas,” I say, every bit as gently.

His touch is moonlight and heaven against my skin as he slides the skimpy fabric down and lets it drop to the floor. Grasping my ass, he runs his lips over the crease where thigh meets hip, nuzzling against my skin before moving toward my core. I’m aching for his touch, half-crazed to feel him—

“Rosie,” Ren says from behind me, a firm note of command in his voice. “I seem to remember telling you to get on your knees.”

The noise that rasps out of my throat is half need, half desperation, but there’s nothing I can do other than submit to the tantalizing order. As much as I want Silas to touch me, I want this for him more. To put my hands and mouth on him, to make him feel as good as he’s made me.

Holding Silas’s gaze, I sink to my knees on the rug next to the sofa.

“Tell me,” I murmur, running my hands up his thighs. “If any of this isn’t good for you, you need to tell me.”

He laughs softly. “Nothing you do can be wrong, darling.”

Silas’s cock is just as beautiful as the rest of him, long and thick, impossibly hard for me when I free it from the black slacks he’s wearing. I wrap my fist around him, giving a soft, experimental tug and watching his face to see how he’ll react.

As out of my mind with need as I am right now, I still want to be careful with him. All of this has to be so new, so overwhelming.

Silas, though, doesn’t seem to be feeling anything but pleasure as his head drops back against the sofa and his hips thrust into my touch. Fighting back a grin, I decide to give him a little bit more.

As soon as my tongue flicks out and traces the underside of his shaft, teasing up to run along the ridge of flesh right under the head, Silas’s breath

hitches and a strangled noise breaks from his chest.

I pull back a few inches. “Is it too much? I don’t want to overwhelm you, if all of this is too—”

“No,” Silas groans, peeling his eyes open and reaching down to cradle the back of my head, nudging me back toward his cock. “No, Rosemary. This is... all of this... it’s not... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get enough.”

“Rose,” I whisper, reminding him. “You can call me Rose.”

Silas’s laugh is hoarse and unsteady. “I’ll try to remember that, darling.”

Desperate to have him bare against me, I tug his pants and underwear down his legs. He strips off the black shirt he’s wearing and tosses it carelessly aside.

I close my lips around the head of his cock, sucking and licking and savoring the taste of him. The hand he has in my hair tightens, and I hum in satisfaction, taking him deeper into my mouth.

He curses harshly and drops his head back against the sofa. His hips shift beneath me, tight and controlled, like he’s holding himself back from fucking into my mouth.

I do my very best to break that control as I work him in slow strokes and teasing licks, flicking my eyes up to watch him come apart under my ministrations.

While I’m busy taking care of Silas, Ren kneels on the rug behind me. He runs his hands over my waist, my hips, my ass, kneading and squeezing while an approving growl rumbles in his chest.

When he runs a finger down the length of my slit, spreading the pooled wetness he finds there, I moan around Silas’s cock.

“Just look at you,” Ren says. “Soaked for us. So eager to be filled.”

My wet, wanting, empty pussy clenches on nothing at the slight humiliation in his words. With my mouth too full to speak, I just make another ragged, desperate noise and Ren chuckles.

He slides two thick fingers deep into me and I cry out again, bucking my hips against the sensation.

“Fuck, Silas,” Ren curses. “She feels incredible.”

“I’m aware,” Silas groans, eyes still closed against the onslaught of pleasure I’m giving him.

The glow of their approval makes a giddy warmth spread from the center of my chest. It bubbles up my throat in a delighted giggle, but the sound is lost in another sharp moan when Ren crooks his fingers forward

inside me. He hits a spot that makes my whole body convulse in pleasure, stroking me over and over until a new sensation joins the feeling of his fingers stretching me.

Renwick's tail teases up the inside of my thighs, brushes over the spot where he's still working his fingers in and out of my pussy, and slides higher still until it's pressed against my ass. My breath catches as it prods and tests, breaching the tight ring of muscle there in a heavy, determined push.

"Breathe, Rosie," Ren says.

My exhale comes out through my nose in a shaky rush and my body relaxes, letting him further inside.

"Look at you taking us so well," Ren purrs, stroking my back as his tail continues to work in and out of me. "Such a good little witch for us. So well behaved."

I whimper around the cock in my mouth and Silas thrusts further in like he can't help himself, sliding into my throat. I swallow him down, dig my nails into his pale flesh, revel in the feel of having him warm and solid beneath my hands.

A moment later, Ren's second hand joins his first, reaching between my thighs to catch my clit in a light pinch. It sends me spiraling, wrenches a muffled scream from my throat, and has me racing quickly toward a climax. I almost think Ren will edge me like he did that night in the forest, keep me wound tight and wanting, but the demon has a little more mercy in him tonight.

"Let go, witch," he says, leaning his big body over my back and murmuring into my ear. "Let go for us."

It's all the encouragement I need.

Letting go, letting all of it in—the two of them, the magick we're creating, the beautiful impossibility of this entire night—pleasure rips through me. From where my lips are wrapped around Silas's cock to where Ren's tail is lodged inside of me, it burns through me like wildfire as I come in devastating, soul-shattering waves.

Both my monsters hold me all the way through the aftershocks. Silas threads his fingers into my hair, and Ren keeps gently stroking me, drawing every last drop of pleasure from me he can.

"Beautiful," Silas murmurs, and I finally find the strength to peel my eyes open, even though my limbs still feel like jelly. "So beautiful when you come for us, darling."

Needing a few seconds to catch my breath, I pull myself off him and rest my cheek against his thigh.

“Have you had enough of us, witch?” Ren asks, and although there’s still a thread of teasing in his voice, there’s also a note of tender care.

“No,” I groan, making my loose muscles cooperate as I raise up off Silas to look at him. “Not nearly enough.”

“Are you sure?” Silas asks. “If all of this is too much, we don’t have to —”

“Hey. That’s my line, remember?”

Silas laughs, and before I can get another word in Ren grasps my hips in both hands, tugging them back against his.

It’s not Ren’s tail pushing against my ass this time, and when I glance over my shoulder the demon is watching me with a challenge in his red eyes.

“Can you take us both, greedy girl?”

I’m sure my own eyes are bright, eager, glazed with lust and power as I nod and push back against him.

Ren tightens his grip to hold me still. “Slowly, love. Let me ease you open.”

With a snap of his fingers, an ornate glass bottle appears from nowhere. He pulls the stopper and tips some of whatever’s inside into his palm before taking his cock in hand and rubbing it in slow, provocative strokes.

Demon lube, I guess. Whatever it is, it smells divine. Sharp and herbal, with notes of rich spice. When the blunt head of his cock presses into my ass, it’s also warm and tingly and so unexpected that I let out a strangled cry and squirm against him.

“Like that?” Ren asks, rocking into me again.

I can only groan in reply, at least until I realize...

“This feels... easier than it should be,” I gasp.

“Ah. You noticed. That would be the oil, Rosie. Let it do what it’s supposed to.”

Fucking *magick* demon lube.

However the hell it’s working, I’m not about to complain as the heat of it softens me, relaxes me, and lets Ren even further inside. The stretch is there, but not the pain, nothing but a small pinch of it that has me rolling my hips and pressing into him, groaning again when I feel his hips bump up against the swell of my ass.

Ren lets out a groan of his own as he slides deep within me, then

remembers himself and clicks his tongue in disapproval. “You’re neglecting our shade.”

I turn my attention back to Silas’s cock, but as soon as I wrap my lips around him, he pulls out of my mouth. “Your cunt. I want your cunt.”

Silas reaches for me, Ren pulls out of me, and the three of us shift onto the sofa. Silas leans back into the cushions and settles me astride his lap while Ren puts a knee on the sofa beside Silas’s thigh and lines himself up behind me.

“You’re protected?” Ren asks.

“Yes. I have a birth control implant.”

“Good. I don’t want anything between you and us, witch. We’re going to fill you so well, over and over, making you come until you’re begging us for mercy.”

The words are crass, and so fucking hot that I arch back and tug Ren into an open, carnal kiss before pulling away with a bratty taunt in my voice I know will send him right over the edge.

“I’d like to see you try.”

The growl in Ren’s chest is even deeper this time, a warning that sends a decadent thrill through me. “Careful, witch.”

He gives my ass a stinging slap and I cry out in delight before turning my attention back to the shade below me. Silas watches with want and need and something like wonder in his eyes as I lower myself over him.

“You’ve never...?” I ask, glancing meaningfully down at where the tip of his cock has slipped just inside me.

Silas gives his head a jerky shake, letting out a tense breath through his nose. With as tightly wound as he is right now, I want to make this good for him.

“I’ll be gentle,” I whisper, rocking my hips a little and sliding him in another inch.

My shade, though, seems to have something else in mind.

“Absolutely not,” he says in a voice that’s so deep, so graveled, so un-Silas-like that my breath catches in my throat. “You’ll give me every bit of your fire, Rose. Every bit of it and more.”

He takes my hips in a firm grip and tugs me down. With as wet and wanting as I already am, he slides into me with one smooth stroke, letting out a tortured groan as he bottoms out. I cry out, too, in surprise and delight and the impossible pleasure of having him inside me.

Goddess, he feels amazing.

Breathing hard and shifting a little, I let my body open for him, adjust to the size and the stretch of him before leaning down and capturing his mouth in a hot, claiming kiss.

“My own beautiful darling,” he murmurs against my lips as he palms my ass and opens me up for Renwick. “Just perfect for us, aren’t you?”

Ren answers for him. “Absolutely perfect.”

With Silas still lodged firmly in my pussy, the stretch of Ren sinking back into my ass is intense. It borders on just this side of too much as he works himself inside in a series of short, shallow thrusts. But with both of them murmuring endearments and praise, with the heat of them surrounding me and the delicious burn of Ren’s lube, I breathe through it and trust my monsters to take care of me.

By the time they’re both sunk deep into me, we’re all a panting, sweaty, glorious mess. I’m pressed into the firm wall of Silas’s chest, with two sets of strong hands holding me steady.

“You’re both so fucking beautiful,” Ren rasps.

He fists a hand into my hair first, tipping my head back so he can plunder my mouth with a ferocity that pulls a strangled whimper from the back of my throat. He goes for Silas next, wrapping a hand around the back of the shade’s neck and dragging him forward for a hard, devouring kiss.

The movement forces both of them deeper inside me, and we all groan.

I’m putty in their hands as they move, working out a rhythm between them that keeps me full, stretched, pushed to the absolute limit of what I think I can handle. The noises I’m making are pure want and need, gasps and moans and little screams that spur them both on.

“One more,” Ren growls into my ear. “You’re going to give us one more, Rosie. Let us feel you come for us.”

Silas leans in to drag his lips over my throat and drops a hand down to rub slow circles against my clit with the pad of his thumb.

I’m powerless against the pleasure they’re giving me, helpless to do anything but succumb to the magick of them, of us. It crests higher, burns hotter, destroys and remakes me completely as I come apart at the seams, every atom washed in flaming glory as my climax breaks over me.

Silas breaks next, taking my hips in a bruising grip and thrusting deep, spilling into me and burying his face in my neck. Ren joins him a moment later, a wash of heat inside me as he collapses onto my back with a hoarse

shout.

We all fall into a pile of beating hearts and shaking limbs and heavy, pleasure-laced panting. We're so close and entwined I don't know whose hands are whose, whose groans echo in my ears, or where one of us ends and the other begins.

It feels... incredible. So right. Being here with both of them, letting the magick of the moment wash over us and chase away any lingering uncertainty over the fact that the three of us were always meant to be right here, just like this.

I'm an absolute puddle of a person as the three of us settle into my bed. The full-size mattress is definitely too small for a witch and her two monsters, but after we make a quick pit-stop in the bathroom to clean ourselves up, and cuddle together under every spare quilt we can find, it hardly matters.

It's cozy and close and intimate. It's peaceful, a little slice of bliss I could stay in for the rest of my life.

I'm draped across Silas's chest with Ren pressed up against me like a big demon blanket—one hand on the curve of my ass and the other stroking softly through Silas's hair.

Impossible, to have Silas here, like this. As I slowly come back to sanity, my mind races with the implications of what it means to have him whole and real against me.

"Will you stay like this?" I ask, a little concerned he might miss his other form.

Silas thinks for a moment, raises one hand, and I watch as his fingers disappear into wisps of darkness. My breath catches in surprise, but they're back a moment later. He sends a band of shadow to wrap around my wrist in a solid restraint, and my blood heats with all the interesting possibilities those shadows bring to mind.

"Yes, darling, I think I will. The shift feels easier, like I'm more in control of it than I've ever been. Because of you both."

He reaches over me to stroke the side of Ren's face, and a satisfied rumble kicks up in our demon's chest.

"So," I say, still trying to wrap my mind around it all. "This is you anchored? And Ren and I... both of us are your anchor? Have you ever heard of it happening that way?"

Silas shakes his head, wonder lighting his eyes. "No. I haven't."

Ren drops his hand to Silas's jaw, leaning over me so he can press a kiss against his lips. It squishes me between them and I let out a happy little sigh.

"It's because this was always meant to be," Ren says, making sure I get

a kiss, too, before he settles back onto the bed. “The three of us. Just like this.”

“That must be true,” Silas murmurs. “Because I can’t imagine anything in the world feeling as right as this does.”

Tenderness and affection and a warm, radiating happiness spread from the center of my chest.

“I think it’s because you’re too much for just one anchor,” I say with a laugh, nearly delirious with joy. “Too kind. Too generous. Too handsome. Too—”

“Stop,” Silas groans. “Or you’ll ruin me, darling. I’ll never be able to get enough of your sweet praise.”

“Good,” I sass him, leaning up to catch his lips in a quick kiss. “Because you’re going to have to deal with it for a while.”

“A while,” Silas says cautiously, pulling back from the kiss. “Does that mean you’ve decided what you’re going to do? If you’re going to stay here with us?”

He looks over my head, catching Renwick’s eye, and the worry in his gaze makes my chest ache even more.

Silly shade. How could he think I’d leave now?

Ren tightens his grip on my ass. “Of course she is. Isn’t that right, Rosie?”

I can’t resist a taunt like that. “Is it? You’re sure about that?”

“Careful, Ren,” Silas warns on the edge of a laugh. “You’ll scare our pretty witch off.”

“No, I won’t. She knows right where she belongs, and who she belongs to.”

I’m about to give him some more sass when he grips my chin tightly and covers my lips with his. His kiss is hot, searing, possessive, and my head is swimming with need by the time he pulls away.

Like he can see all that need on my face, Ren gives me a knowing grin before turning back to Silas.

“See? Just like I said. Rosie isn’t going anywhere.”

Well. Now *that* prickles a little. Not in a way that makes me truly angry, but just enough to have my temper sparking as I raise up again to face my demon.

Silas, however, beats me to the punch. “Always need to have the last word, don’t you?”

Ren opens his mouth, but I jump in before he can speak.

“He is pretty fucking bossy, isn’t he?”

I smirk at Silas, and when he catches the conspiratorial glint in my tone, he gives me his own wicked smile. His darkness spreads, leaking out into the air around him like ink in water.

Ren’s red gaze bounces back and forth between us. “What do you think you’re—”

Two tendrils of shadow band around his wrists, restraining him. I spring away, laughter bubbling up in my throat.

“Shade,” Ren says, a warning. “Whatever you’re trying to—”

“It’s our turn,” Silas croons. “I think it’s time you learned how to surrender some of that control you like so much.”

Ren opens his mouth to reply, but whatever he meant to say cuts off in a sharp noise of surprise as more of those shadows band around his chest and shoulders, keeping him pinned flat to the bed.

With a satisfied hum, Silas turns back to me. “I think he needs to taste the mess I made of you, darling. Can you help him with that?”

He doesn’t mean what I think he... *oh*. Yes, he absolutely does.

Wicked delight courses through me as I nod and move up the bed. Kneeling over Ren’s face, I look down at him with a taunting smile.

“Tell us to stop,” I echo his words from that night in the forest when he chased me down and gave me my punishment. “If there’s anything we do you don’t like, tell us to stop.”

Ren growls low in his throat. “Not a chance, witch.”

He moves as much as he’s still able, jerking under me. Thrown off balance, I have to brace my hands on his horns to keep from smacking into the headboard. It puts me right over his hot, seeking mouth, and another growl rumbles in his chest.

“Do your worst, Rosie. Let’s see if you can make me beg for mercy.”

I lower the last few inches onto his face and he’s right there to meet me with lips and tongue and teeth, urging me on with his rumbles of pleasure.

“She’s not the only one who’s going to try, demon.”

I glance over my shoulder just in time to see Silas’s lips close around Ren’s cock. Ren lets out a groan against my pussy and his big body jerks beneath me as he fights against his restraints.

I grip his horns tighter, and cry out in pleasure when his tongue presses into me. He devours me, moving with every snap of my hips, licking and

sucking and laving against me until I feel the first tightening spasms of my orgasm rippling through my belly.

He must be pretty close, too, because the jerking of his body beneath me and the desperate sounds rasping from him grow more urgent as Silas works him with devilish intent.

I look over my shoulder again and catch Silas's eye. His mouth is wrapped around Ren's maroon cock, and he looks so fucking pleased with himself, so utterly focused on taking our demon apart, that it ratchets my pleasure even higher.

But apparently Ren has been teased enough.

"Mercy," he growls, and all those shadows disappear immediately.

He pulls himself free of Silas's mouth and surges up from under me. I let out a little squeal as he tosses me onto the mattress before lunging for Silas. Their two beautiful bodies meet in a frenzy of hot, seeking mouths and eager hands, grasping and stroking, groaning into the ferocity of their kiss.

Ren pulls back, hand tangled into Silas's hair. "Do you like the taste of our witch?"

Silas licks the sheen of me Ren left on his lips and makes a strangled sound that might be a yes, or might just be the absolute overwhelm of being in our demon's grasp.

"Good," Ren grunts. "Then you can finish her while I take care of you."

Silas groans his reply, and Ren jerks his chin toward me. "Up, witch. Rest your back against the headboard."

Goddess above, the things it does to me to be ordered about by this demon.

I follow his instructions like the obedient witch I am, eyes widening when Ren maneuvers Silas in front of him. Ren presses a hand to the middle of Silas's shoulders until he's bent over at the waist with his upper body resting between my thighs and his ass up and exposed for Ren's mercy. His tail curves around Silas's thigh, wrapping tightly and giving a quick jerk to spread him even wider.

"Let him see your cunt, Rosie," Ren commands as he grabs the bottle of lube from his pocket realm. "Let our shade have the privilege of tasting you."

Silas comes to me eager and greedy, pressing his hands into my thighs to spread me wide, running his tongue up the length of me to swirl around my clit. Ren watches with fires burning in his crimson eyes as he massages the oil into Silas and works him open with the tip of his tail.

It's too much. Too fucking much to have Silas's mouth on me and the impossibly erotic sight of my two lovers in front of me.

All my muscles are already tightening with my fast-approaching climax. I thread my hands into Silas's hair and grind against his eager mouth. Shamelessly chasing my own pleasure, I teach him just how I like it with each roll of my hips and each satisfied moan.

"Are you ready to take me, shade?" Ren rasps, pressing his erection into Silas.

"Yes," Silas groans into my core. "Goddess, please, Ren. I need—"

His words cut off on a ragged cry as Ren sinks into him. He buries himself deep, thrusting into Silas with enough force to push him into me and send my head bumping lightly off the headboard.

The grip Silas has on my thighs tightens and all the desperate sounds he's making echo into my pussy. When Ren's seated himself to the hilt, he reaches down and buries his hand in Silas's golden hair, tipping his head back and making the shade look up at him.

"You're mine," he growls, pumping his hips once for good measure.

He presses Silas's face back to my pussy, then drags his crimson gaze up to meet mine.

"You too, witch. Both of you are mine."

The satisfied gleam in his eye and the pride in his voice make something tighten in wonderful, tender pain near the center of my chest.

All that tenderness only lasts a moment, though, before Silas turns all his dark focus back to me. My back arches and I cry out as he spears his tongue into me and sends a tendril of shadow to graze against my clit.

We're all a mess of need and want, greed and giving, warm flesh and shared pleasure. Ren's thrusts ripple through Silas's body, through *me* as the shade works me in time with the demon's strokes. Magick swirls and moonlight caresses against our skin, until all that darkness and power reaches its breaking point.

I shatter first, my orgasm ripping through me with enough intensity to black out my vision for a few long, ecstatic moments. Silas works me through every spasm, fingers sunk into me and tongue laving over my clit, only giving me mercy when I'm boneless and breathless, slumped into the headboard.

Ren wraps an arm around Silas's middle, pulling him up until he's on his knees with his back to Ren's chest. When he's got the shade right where

he wants him, Ren brackets Silas's throat with one hand and drops the other to take his cock in a firm, commanding grip.

Ren keeps moving, keeps thrusting, taking control of Silas's body and pleasure completely, sinking his teeth into Silas's pale shoulder as he strokes him toward his climax.

Body still shaking with the aftermath of my orgasm, I bask in the unimaginable pleasure of watching them. The delicious ferocity of their straining muscles and the graceless rutting of their bodies as they work each other toward oblivion, the ecstasy on their faces and the desperate rasp of their breath.

They're beautiful. Both of them. They belong to me, and to each other, and all of this feels so fucking *right* that tears start to gather in the corners of my eyes.

Ren's thrusts become uneven, and his panting breaths are laced with the edge of a growl as he reaches his peak. And Silas is right there with him, cock jerking helplessly in Ren's grasp as his own orgasm crests.

"Witch," Ren grunts. "Mouth on his cock. Suck him down deep while I fill him up."

He doesn't have to tell me twice.

Almost as soon as I get my lips around our shade, he comes apart at the seams, letting out a hoarse cry and clutching his hands into my hair. I swallow him greedily and revel in the sound of Ren finding his own release just a few moments later. He spills into Silas with a shout, tipping Silas's head back to catch his mouth in a messy, inelegant kiss.

The two of them disentangle a couple minutes later and drag themselves back up the bed toward me. There are more kisses, more lazy, stroking touches, more soul-shattering tenderness than I think I can possibly bear.

After another trip to the bathroom to clean up, we find ourselves in my tiny kitchen for a long-past-midnight snack. While Silas busies himself putting on some tea, Ren sinks into one of the chairs at the kitchen table and tugs me into his lap.

There's a coziness in the moment, a quiet sort of domestication. For a few heartbeats it seems to stretch on so much bigger than this one evening. It unfolds into hundreds and thousands of nights just like this. Nights of peace and pleasure, a life that's just begun.

"What are you thinking about, Rosie?" Ren murmurs.

I tip my head to the side, giving access to the seeking lips he runs over

my neck. “I’m thinking we might need a bigger house.”

Silas laughs as he pours two mugs of tea and hands one to me, then sinks into the chair on the opposite side of the table. “I’m quite fond of this one.”

“I’ll talk to Odelia,” Ren says, leaning in to take the sip of tea I offer him.

I just hum low in my throat in response, too overwhelmed by how happy I am to worry about all the details.

Across the table, Silas wrinkles his nose as he takes a sip.

“What?” I ask.

“I... don’t think I like tea,” he says, setting it down with a shudder.

“Maybe coffee will be better,” I offer in consolation.

“And if that fails,” Ren chimes in. “I know a couple other things you certainly like the taste—”

He lets out a slight *oof* as I elbow him in the ribs and stand.

“We’ll figure it out,” I say, another wave of tenderness rising in my chest as I step to where Silas is sitting and he opens his arms to me. Sinking into his lap, I brush his hair back off his forehead. “We’ve got all the time in the world to figure it out.”

“We certainly do.” He wraps me up tight in his embrace and presses a gentle kiss to my lips.

It’s later, long past the witching hour when we’re piled back into my bed in an exhausted tangle, that it washes over me again.

The impossibility of it all. The wonder of having found my new place and my new path, the certainty that this is where I’m supposed to be.

Cradled between Ren and Silas, I kiss one, then the other. I stroke gentle fingers through their hair and listen as both their breathing evens out in sleep. I glance down and see their bound hands resting against my belly and let it in. All of it. Every drop of joy and relief and peace.

And when my heavy eyes finally shut, I fall into a dreamless sleep, warm and safe between my two monsters.

One year later

“Hold our witch still, Silas.”

I’m entirely bound in my shade’s shadows, pleasure coursing through me and night air brushing against my bare skin as I come down from a toe-curling orgasm.

We’re in the woods, surrounded by October darkness and the chill of the autumn evening pressing in close.

Silas rests his back on the thick, gnarled oak behind me with arms and shadows wrapped around my body. Ren kneels on the forest floor, lips and tongue working against my pussy as he takes me apart piece by piece.

As soon as the last waves of my orgasm subside, Ren stands and leans in to kiss Silas, pressing me between them and feeding the shade the taste of me from his lips.

The noises the two of them are making—deep and carnal and satisfied—drive me absolutely feral. As soon as the shadows binding my hands fall away, I reach down and tug at the laces on Ren’s leather pants, desperate to return the pleasure he just gave me.

The three of us sink to the forest floor in a tangle of hands and bodies and need. The mossy ground is soft beneath my knees as I free Ren’s cock from his pants and give it a couple hard strokes. While I do, Silas’s shadows wrap around me again, teasing me back into a frenzy. I moan and arch against him when I feel the thick head of his cock press into me.

“You’re doing so well, my darling. Do you think you can take a little more?”

“Yes,” I cry, desperate for it. “Yes, *please*.”

A shadow tightens around my neck, not cutting off my air, but carefully placed to constrict my blood flow. Just a little. Just enough to make my head swim with pleasure.

A few more shadows wrap around my chest and torso, supporting me,

while more darkness encircles my wrists to bind them behind my back.

I'm completely at my monsters' mercy.

"Look how pretty you are, Rosemary, all trussed up in my shadows," Silas says, then sinks his cock into me, filling me in one swift stroke. "You're beautiful, darling."

I cry out again, a hoarse, shattered thing in the October night.

Ren grips my hair a moment later, bringing my lips to his cock. I open eagerly for him, moaning around him as he buries himself in my mouth.

The two of them work me like that, finding a rhythm that bounces me between them. I'm helpless in their hands, but like every time we've been together since that very first night, I trust them completely. I trust them to hold me, to take care of me, to drive me out of my fucking mind with pleasure and to be there to pick up the satisfied pieces after I fall apart.

With moonlight streaming over us, we find our pleasure together. My scream of bliss is muffled by Ren's cock jerking against the back of my throat, and Silas grips me hard as he slams deep and comes with a hoarse shout.

Silas releases my wrists, and his shadows gentle immediately, soothing over the places he had me bound.

"Fucking hell, Rosie," Ren pants, pulling my satiated body into his arms so I don't go sprawling on the forest floor.

Silas is there a moment later, tipping my chin up and kissing me deep so he can devour the taste of Ren from my lips. "Are you alright, darling?"

I nuzzle into his neck. "Never better."

We stay that way for a few minutes, catching our breath before we half-dress and head out of the forest.

"Finale night tomorrow," Silas says as we make our way back to the cottage we moved into last November, the one that's a little bigger and better suited to the three of us, but no less cozy.

Silas has me nestled in his embrace, and Ren has an arm slung over his shoulders as the staff village comes into view. We pass a few other monsters from the manor before we reach our cottage, but besides some knowing smiles, nobody bats an eye.

It's been one of my favorite things about finding my place here, the permission to just be. To be myself, to be with Ren and Silas, to simply exist without fear I don't belong.

"And it's going to be one hell of a show," Ren says.

“You say that about every night we perform together,” I tease.

“And I’m right every time.”

I laugh softly and close my eyes in sated bliss as we step inside our home.

Samhain night falls with the same static, crackling energy and magick it had last year.

Unlike last year, though, there’s no doubt I’m exactly where I need to be as I walk up the front stairs of the manor and step inside. A century of Bramwell magick greets me, wending its way over my skin and deep into my lungs, each inhale a warm, familiar embrace.

Far below the manor, in a chamber of the labyrinth outfitted with my father’s old alchemy equipment and all the new pieces I’ve picked up over the last year, more of that magick waits for me.

It’s tinged with occasional sadness and uncertainty as I’ve explored this new facet of my power, but it’s not something I’m afraid of anymore.

Heading toward the parlor, I run into Odelia. She gives me a brusque, business-like nod and a once-over, examining the intricate witch’s costume I’ve chosen for tonight.

“We’re set to have a record crowd this evening,” she says. “I do hope you and Renwick are ready to put on a good show.”

“Always,” I tell her, calling the word over my shoulder with careless arrogance as I brush past her. “We always put on a good show.”

She huffs a laugh in reply as I turn the corner, but I can hear her approval in the sound.

Odelia’s still a pain in the ass to deal with sometimes, but she’s also become a mentor for me over the last year. I don’t think I’ll ever see her as any kind of maternal figure, and we’ll probably never have a warm and fuzzy relationship, but it’s something. One more tie that binds me to this place, one more root to keep me anchored.

My boast to her doesn’t feel empty as I swing open the door to the set Ren and I share, and look around at the room that’s changed so much.

I’m the star of the scene this year.

Lucifer’s Parlor has become a witch’s workshop, with a pentagram stenciled in blood-red paint on the floor and a cauldron bubbling over in the corner. It’s a little scene we came up with together, and as Ren strides into the room a few moments later and swings me into an embrace, I’m more than

ready for a season grand finale with my demon.

“Ready for this?” he asks after taking my mouth in a swift, breath-stealing kiss.

“Always.”

It’s hours later when our last group of guests for the evening has filed into the room. The candles burn low, and magick seeps through the air like a living darkness.

“Let’s see what we can summon,” I croon, reveling in their fear and delight.

Murmuring some Latin nonsense over the pentagram, I send a ring of flames to burn harmlessly around its edge. A few cries of surprise break from the crowd, and the response makes my wicked grin spread even wider.

“Do you feel that?” I ask, lowering my voice until it’s little more than a whisper. “My portal to hell has been opened.”

A flash of flame lights all the guests’ faces in a shock of vivid red before the room is plunged into darkness and screams.

“You know not what ancient horror you’ve unleashed, witch.”

I almost break my composure at Ren’s deep, thundering tone and the answering yelps and gasps from the crowd. In the pitch darkness, they can’t see him yet. I light the flames around the pentagram again, raising them higher and higher to reveal the demon standing in its center.

It’s my turn to put on an expression of fright and horror as my demon rounds on me with dark mirth dancing in his eyes.

“I thank you, witch, for cursing this world with the chaos I’ll unleash.”

“I’ll send you back to hell where you belong, demon.”

I send a column of heatless flame toward him, and he bats it away with a swing of his bare, muscled arm.

“You’re going to have to do better than that.”

We go back and forth for a few minutes, trading taunts and insults, moving around the room in a dance of flames and magick that has the guests eating our performance up.

Finally, Ren grabs me and pulls me to the hard wall of his chest where he’s standing in the middle of the pentagram.

“Or maybe I’ll bring you back to hell with me,” he says, his voice a low, sinister threat. “And keep you as my prisoner for eternity.”

With that, he moves us both into a pocket realm, and I bathe the room in

a final burst of flame as we disappear. Through the hazy barrier of the realm, we watch the guests leave, chattering excitedly as they're escorted out of the room.

As soon as they're gone, we step back into the mortal realm and I turn to face Ren with a grin splitting my face. Before I can lunge for him, though, a movement in the shadows at the corner of the room catches my eye.

"That was brilliant, both of you."

"Silas!" I cry in surprise, eyes widening as he materializes back into his corporeal form.

"I had to see it at least once," he says with a rueful grin. "After hearing so many good things about the show you two have been putting on this season."

Silas has been busy this past year, both with his continued duties as the eyes and ears for the Acres, and with discovering all the delights and irritations of having a physical body to contend with.

I throw my arms around his neck. "And did it live up to your high expectations?"

"Of course it did," he chuckles, kissing my cheek. "The two of you are magnificent together."

"Come on," Ren says, voice unexpectedly thick with emotion. "We've got a bonfire to get to."

Both Silas and I smirk at him before reaching out together to tug him into our embrace.

Later, when we're all lit with the flames of the Samhain celebration, surrounded by witches and monsters and magick, I pull my two lovers to me again. We dance under the moonlight and revel in the joy of it all.

It reminds me again how endlessly grateful I am.

For this place, for the magick I've learned to embrace, for Ren and Silas and the life we've built together.

For my monsters and the improbable, impossible love I've found with them.

Thank you for reading Monsters' Manor! If you'd like to read a little more of Rosemary, Silas and Renwick's story—including a chase through the woods told through both Ren and Silas's POVs—[check out their bonus epilogue on](#)

[my website.](#)