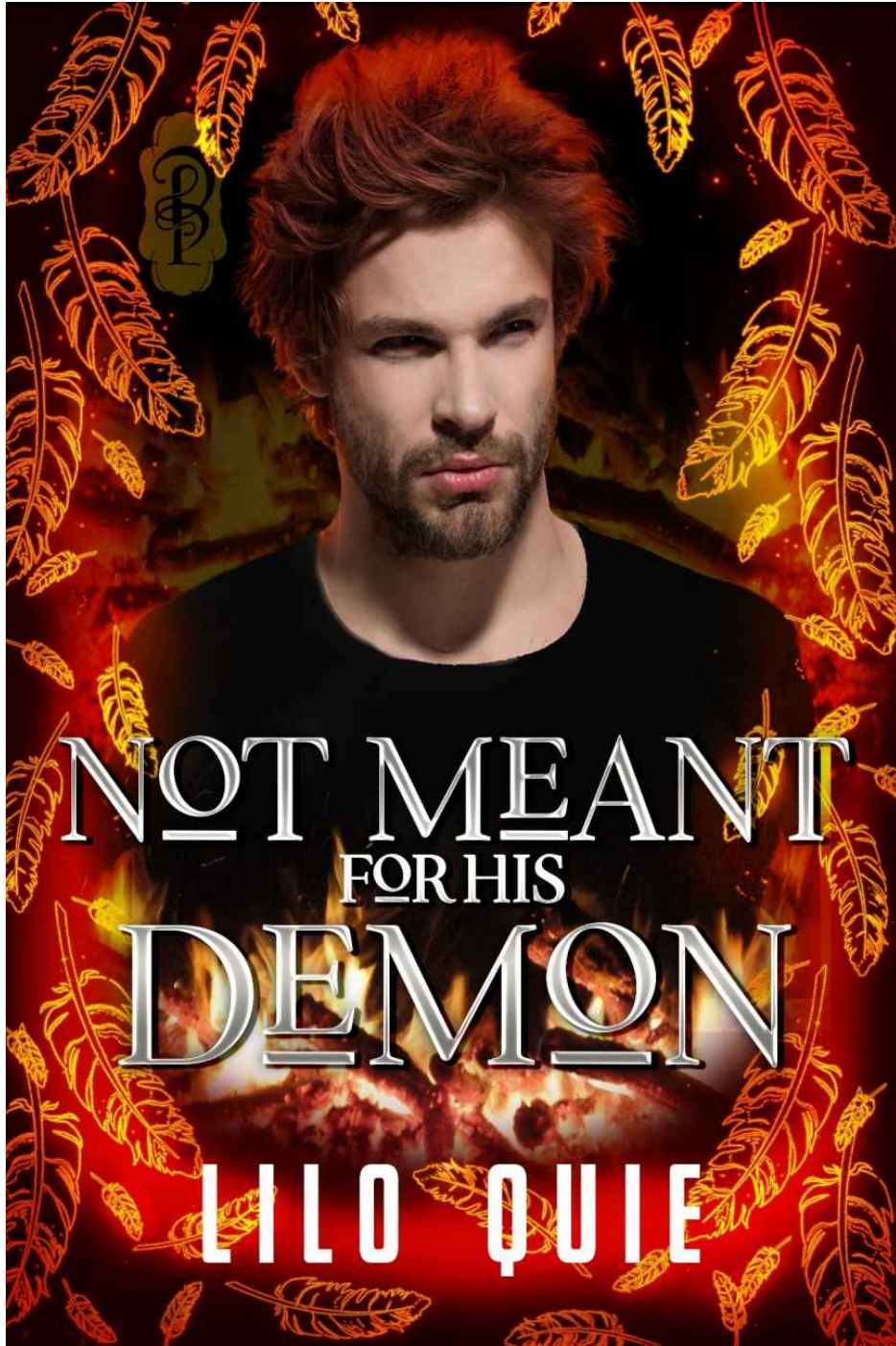




NOT MEANT
FOR HIS
DEMON

L I L O Q U I E



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DEMON

LILLO QUIE

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Copyright 2023 by Lilo Quie

Digital ISBN: 978-1-68361-822-5

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-68361-823-2

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Published by Decadent Publishing LLC

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Jericho, made of behemoth's horn and feather, was born the mate of a demon lord, groomed and well-prepared for the mate that would claim him and settle the debts of the contract. Life hasn't been all sunshine and roses, but he lives every day in wait for his happily ever after. But when his mate never comes, Jericho is forced to mask his scent and infiltrate Firstlight Industries under the nose of Lucifer himself to find what has happened to his mate.

Malkiel Elend has been alone for longer than most demon kind have been alive. He is of the first, of the never born, of the endless. Malkiel, red of wing, whose fall was predicted in the breath of his creation, parted from his first love so long ago that he's forgotten what love is like. Life has lost all flavor, but when the scent of eucalyptus and sweet summer beer tickles his senses, maybe being mated again wouldn't be such a hardship?

Here we go again! Demons demons demons. As we journey into what it means to be a demon, we touch upon what to believe and what the consequences of those beliefs are. Never underestimate the power of the imagination of millions of humans and the willingness of demons to capitalize on an ounce of power.

Dedication

To my loving partner, who has learned to just not ask questions.

Not Meant for His Demon

Inner Demons

by

Lilo Quie

Chapter One

Jericho

When life gives you lemons, people keep telling you to make lemonade. Jericho had made lemonade for as long as he could remember, run out of sugar, sucralose, aspartame, stevia, and any other saccharine thing he could add to make the sour a little more palatable. But lemons were short-lived, Jericho told himself. Soon it would be all sunshine, peaches, filet mignon, and caviar. Such was it for the mate of a demon lord, or so he was told, at least.

When, at twenty-three, his mate never showed, Jericho waited, and as the weeks and months zipped by, the lemons kept coming. And, by that time, the world had to be out of lemons because it had descended into throwing rocks at him.

He could bear it.

He had to.

Some nights were harder than others. Being the created mate of a demon lord had its advantages, most of which came with the whole *mate* part of the equation. Without the mate? Not so much. A scent perfused Jericho, one meant to draw the attention of powerful nobility. One meant to draw his mate; a mate that was two years late in claiming him, a mate that had left him full of a power he couldn't use well, and a need for companionship and purpose that left him sleepless and aching for the touch of a higher demon's claws and scent of mist.

“Jericho!” his aunt called up the stairs in her nasal voice.

“N’uh... Guh!” Jericho rolled over in his creaking bed and stared at his curtains, watching orange light filter through the fading green fabric. The twitter of morning song from three species of corvidae having a turf war with a disgruntled one-eyed squirrel finished the job his aunt started.

“M up! I’m up...” Jericho rose from his bed and stumbled across his rag rug and into the cold tiled floor of his small en suite bathroom. His aunt had remodeled everything not seven years ago under the assumption that avocado green would come back into fashion. It didn’t. Though, Jericho would never say a thing about it to his aunt Cass. She’d gone through enough being stuck with him and putting him through college. He held vague hopes that his mate might help his aunt. She deserved so much more.

Shortly after Jericho was born, his mother stopped by his aunt’s home to borrow a few dollars for gas and, somehow, a hundred dollars and the keys to her old car later...Jericho was hers, and his mother, Catherine—Kitty Wilkins, was childless and free once more. She already had her payout, blew through it, and had nothing else left, so Jericho was inconsequential.

“You’re meant for better than all that,” his aunt Cass always told him when he wanted to get a job at fifteen to help her out, when he wanted to drop out of high school to work. She pushed him into an expensive state school and took on overtime and a second job to meet his tuition...that is, until her company laid her off in the midst of the imp revolts some years ago. Jericho worked hard and made good grades, but with a little finagling, he managed to get a full scholarship to a local community college to finish his bachelors while

bookkeeping for a few local businesses, helping her pay off the mortgage and cover the bills.

“Jericho, you’re going to be late, baby boy!”

“I’m fine, Auntie! I showered last night!” Jericho brushed his teeth and dressed in a hurry before traipsing downstairs.

“I can see that. Your hair is a mess! You slept on it wet, didn’t you?” She came after him, all four foot nine of her, brandishing a tortoiseshell plastic comb.

“Auntie!” Jericho hissed and tried to fend her off, only to receive a sharp smack to his arm until he sat and let her finish.

“Your hair is so fine it tangles!” She growled and pulled her comb as his fine, ginger hair flowed from his face and found its way, tied up neatly into a short ponytail at the back of his head. “You need a haircut.”

“Bills first, hair later. You could cut it for me.” He smiled over his shoulder hopefully and she shook her head.

“Not a chance, mister. I’d screw it up so bad. I’m decent with curls where you can hide things, but one wrong snip to yours and the world will know.” She patted his back, and he sighed, standing to his full height and stared down at her. He’d been taller than her since he was twelve. Though, that wasn’t much of a feat since half imps rarely got over five foot five, less for women.

“Where’s my cologne you picked up yesterday?” Jericho scrounged around the kitchen as she dug into her purse and pulled out a small bottle.

“It’s so small...” Jericho sighed. It was so expensive in the first place.

“Isaac said it was the best he can do. The imp council is cracking down on the stuff because imps are using it to pass off as full-blooded.” She stared at the floor as he gave himself a sparing spritz, hoping it lasted.

Cass worked in service to one of Lucifer Firstlight’s sons, Falcalor, these days. It didn’t pay as nicely as it did working for Malacoda, but since he’d had his son a few years ago and some subterfuge happened, Cass got caught in the crossfire of cutbacks. Falcalor was nice though.

Jericho had known since he was young that a demon lord awaited him, and Cass had worked hard to mold and form him, but every month that went by without even a sniff of his mate drove Jericho to more extremes to find him.

He sniffed the cologne on himself, the one that hid the scent of unclaimed mate, and grabbed a few cold slices of raisin bread from a bag on the counter. He pecked a quick kiss to the top of Cass’s head amid her periwinkle locks of hair and pinkened skin, dodging her horns as he’d always done. One day, he thought, he’d have his own horns, but not then.

Cass chased him out, waving a set of keys at him. “Thanks, Auntie!” He grabbed them and gave her a one-armed hug before climbing into the car. He glanced over his shoulder, watching as she headed off so she could go to bed and wake rested enough to hit the night shift.

He parked in the south lot of Firstlight industries, chasing the heels of a few people headed toward the elevator. He always ran half an hour early, at least at this job. Bookkeeping wasn’t that glorious, but it paid the bills, and those around him seemed to think he did a fine job. None had ever complained.

He started simple that morning, not yet clocking in. As usual, Jericho traversed the slew of data files and personnel files he could access on the public drives, sleuthing through transactions, praying that one day he'd come across anything bearing the name of Kalamax Dirge, an Apollyonic demon that had commissioned him of the horn of a behemoth and feather. His fingers danced across the keyboard, idly doing his daily searches, tuning the surrounding cubicle noises out as people grumbled and filed in for the day.

“Morning, Jericho.” His next-cube-neighbor peered over the drab gray wall, eyes twinkling in a sparkle of faceted color. *Cambion.*

“Morning, Arath. How are you?” Jericho grinned widely and Arath grinned, blinking the strange whirl of color from his eyes, letting them settle back to a rather bland sort of brown.

“Wonderful. So. I heard something interesting.” Arath bit his lower lip, the slight sharpness of his teeth a little unnerving, but not so much that a human might immediately notice.

“Hm?” Jericho closed out a few windows cautiously before he attracted undue attention. The last thing he needed was questions.

“So, I heard Sonnoth was looking for you. He was asking a lot of questions about your performance and I told him *all* good things.” Arath flicked a brow and Jericho's cheeks heated. “But he seemed really interested in a personal assistant role.”

“I'm only here to work. I don't date.” Jericho returned to his computer and logged into their timekeeping app, typing his

username in.

“Oop, speak of the devil.” Arath made a purring noise deep in his throat before sneaking back down and chuckling. Distracted, Jericho turned his head to glance up at his department head, Sonnoth Drude, a rather distinguished and sculpted male with ties to demon royalty so tight that some suspected he was in wait to receive title and immortal status.

Jericho stood politely and blinked up at Sonnoth, his sandy skin and dark eyes drinking him in.

“Good morning, Wilkins. Early as usual.” His smile didn’t meet his eyes, but everything about him spoke of hunger and emptiness. Jericho swallowed hard.

“Might you come to my office for a moment?” Sonnoth smoothed back his obsidian hair and spread his lips wider. Jericho’s heart twisted.

“I’ve...I’ve not logged in yet.”

“Don’t bother. Come. We’ve much to discuss about your future here at Firstlight.” Sonnoth’s smile brought waves of helplessness over Jericho’s heart. And with the rehab that he was in the process of with his aunt’s mortgage, one missed payment could cost them their home. His was the face of pink slips and unemployment checks.

Jericho lowered his head and followed at a doomed pace.

“Come. Don’t dally.” Sonnoth gestured him down the hall into his private office. The thick wooden door swung effortlessly on well-oiled hinges, out-of-place amid the sterile environs of his cubicle farm.

Sonnoth waved him in and shut the door behind him, the dead bolt clicking damningly into place. “Now, come here.”

Jericho tensed, every muscle in his body trying to seize up as he approached Sonnoth. The higher demons always terrified him. “Sir, if I’ve done something wrong—”

Sonnoth growled, silencing Jericho as he leaned in and sniffed. “Saffron and grapefruit peel? No. Eucalyptus...”

The heat that had taken Jericho’s cheeks not minutes before turned ice cold. No sulfur of the pit? The cologne...it barely covered his natural scent of malt extract and eucalyptus.

Relax. Maybe it’s not that bad. Maybe he’ll only ask for a quickie or a blowjob or something, or you can find some way out of this. Maybe he doesn’t even know.

“I was curious. The IT department came to me the other day, rather concerned.” Sonnoth pulled away and walked toward the only window in the room, straight to slatted blinds which he pulled down, peering into the glittering morning sky. “They said that you’d been spending a lot of time looking through files for specific information.”

Jericho’s heart thundered in his chest. “Not during company hours, sir.”

“Hm. That is true. And your performance has been exemplary, but I wonder why you have been so curious about Kalamax Dirge.” Sonnoth turned sharply as if he’d caught Jericho in a lie, and the words came so easily.

“My aunt said that my mother spent quite a bit of time with him before I was born. I’ve been searching for him. I could possibly figure out who my father was.” Sonnoth recited

it with practiced ease. It was true that his mother spent a good deal of time with Kalamax, and so, too, that she did not know who his father was. Technical truths that a higher demon could smell.

“And so what are you, then? You smell incomplete.”

“Sir, if only I knew. A mutt like me? I’ve not shown a lick of magic and have never misted before.” Jericho told the truth. He had no idea what sort of demon he was. Evidently Sonnoth believed him, as his posture relaxed a little.

“Well, would, that I could give you good news. It’s of no consequence. Kalamax was dispensed of about...five years or so ago? He dealt with imp trade and had a lot to do with some rather dodgy things that really hurt Elliat Pitch’s family. And our lord suffers none that harm a child.” Sonnoth folded his hands and flicked his eyes up at Jericho in annoyance.

“Am I fired?” Jericho swallowed hard. A tingling numbness took him over.

“No. It’s of no consequence. Just know he’s passed on. I am sorry to hear that though.”

The color drained from Jericho’s world. *Dead.*

He’d been born with everlasting life. And he’d die without a drop of his power he needed to survive, no soul to pass on, no name to keep. *Dead.*

“Sorry to be the one to tell you.” Sonnoth studied Jericho a little more, staring at him, probably fixated on his copper and blue eyes, dark cobalt amid a starburst of gold. Mates were said to have spectacular eyes to behold. Jericho took a step

back, air rushing in his ears. His eyes stung, and it was all that Jericho could do not to collapse.

A flash of pity crossed Sonnoth's face as he approached, drawing Jericho to his chest. "I really am sorry." Sonnoth drew his face down to Jericho's ear as every hair on his body stood on end in rejection of the other demon's presence. "But he would have been a terrible mate."

Jericho stiffened and jerked back, trying to get out of Sonnoth's grasp and yelped under his hold.

"So lovely." Sonnoth breathed over Jericho's neck and licked, his long tongue swirling. "How many men have you been with before?"

Jericho bit his tongue, refusing to answer. It wasn't his business, nor anyone else's. Sharp fingernails traced his scalp and grabbed his hair tight.

"I asked a simple question. Do you come to me untouched? I will have to take my time with you if so." Sonnoth nosed his way down Jericho's neck and bit sharply, making him cry out with shock and pain. *An attempted claiming bite.* The tears that Jericho fought won, and they traced his cheeks.

"None." He could no more lie to this demon than he could count the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on all the beaches of the world. Not in this lifetime.

"I don't believe you." Sonnoth hissed, teeth buckling down once more. "I bet you've spread yourself thin trying to fill the void of your dead mate. Does it hurt? Knowing that you're alone?"

Jericho swallowed hard and bit back tears. “I wanted to find him. I didn’t want another male. I wanted to be his.”

“Not happening anymore. What did he make you of?”
Sonnoth pulled his mouth away finally and licked, tasting his blood. “Behemoth?”

“Behemoth’s horn and feather.”

“Feather? Behemoth don’t have feathers.”

“S’what I was told.” Jericho squeaked when Sonnoth darted forward once more to bite that same place, reaffirming his hold.

“You were told wrong or you’re lying.” Sonnoth tugged at Jericho’s hair and growled low.

“I swear. I am telling you the truth. He promised I’d have wings and—” Jericho choked when Sonnoth buried his teeth in deeper, drinking from him in a way that he couldn’t fight back.

“So I’m supposed to believe you’ve been chaste and are somehow made of a piece of a beast that doesn’t exist? You’re made for breeding. You’re a tool.” Sonnoth pulled away and spit on the floor, pulling Jericho’s face back to stare. Dark eyes opened to empty and dull pools that searched for something.
“Then we keep this up until I get a lick of mist from you.”

Chapter Two

Rachael

“Good morning, Mister Lucy.” Rachael skirted into Lucifer’s office, her scientia eyes surveying everything with a hawkish gaze, making sure nothing in his presence was out of place.

“Good morning, Rachael. How were your lessons this morning?” Lucifer looked up from a sheaf of papers atop his desk and lazily trailed his gaze from the papers to his computer screen. He seemed a little off, eyes dark under the rim, sleepy. Far be it for Rachael to say much.

“My tutors think I’ll be done with my high school coursework by November and I’ll be doing online college in the evening. I’m already studying for it. I think a B.S. in business management will be sufficient, like you said.” Rachael pulled a cloth from her pocket and polished an out-of-place snake plant. *Belial’s*. Once upon a time, the thing had sat far too prettily in his foyer. Lucifer kept it as a trophy. Well, that, and the wing mounted above his mantle, however gory of a sight it was.

“And how is my firstborn grandson doing?”

“Xander is fine. The tutor said his reading is really improving fast.” Rachael smiled at the plant before eying her employer, or something of the sort. The kinship she had with Lucifer much more closely resembled that of a mentor-mentee relationship. Though, the title of secretary clung to her as strongly as Xander clung to his pappa’s ankles.

Rachael hopped up onto a specially lifted stool in the corner and pulled up to a little hutch desk where her laptop lay.

“You have an eleven-thirty with Uncle Mal.”

Lucifer grunted in acknowledgement, and Rachael narrowed her eyes as a sudden headache driven by otherworldly knowledge took hold. *Oh.*

Rachael hopped from her stool as Lucifer rubbed his temples and squinted at the screen, as if whatever on it had soured his mood.

She trotted her way down the hall and into the main office area, into a break room kept fully stocked. She rifled through the fridge, pushing up on her tiptoes to find the particular beverage she wanted, and snagged it then arranged a tray with a cup of ice on it. Dutifully, she toted the offering back with her and nudged the door’s handle with her elbow to sidle her way inside and back toward his desk.

The smart pencil skirt suit she wore blended in seamlessly to the black and white of the office, all trim sharp edges, all save for the bright pink of a camisole under the little jacket. She pursed her lips and approached quietly, pushing the tray atop Lucifer’s desk right out of his workspace but well within reach.

“Thank you,” Lucifer grumbled in acknowledgement and opened a fresh can of ginger ale before pouring it over the ice.

Malacoda sauntered in not a few minutes later, his acid eyes every bit as hostile and void of emotion as his father’s. “Father.” He bowed his head and the two sat across from one

another. Lucifer rubbed his temples and sighed before taking a long swig of his drink.

“Father, is all well?” Malacoda tilted his head.

“Mister Lucy is pregnant.” Rachael glanced over from her laptop right as Lucifer spit his beverage across his desk and choked.

“What?” Lucifer beat his chest and had a coughing fit.
“Excuse me?”

Malacoda’s brow furrowed, and he glanced at his father then at Rachael.

“Don’t look at me. I didn’t do it.” Rachael shrugged and resumed organizing Lucifer’s schedule. She had a feeling he’d need to see Malkiel sooner rather than later and would probably need mornings off for the next few weeks... She fired off a few emails to see if she could change a few things with clients.

“Rachael! What would make you say such a thing?” Lucifer grabbed for his handkerchief and daubed at his mouth and offered it to Malacoda, who gently brushed spittle off his sleeve.

“Because you had a rush two weeks ago and now, you’re all gross and tired and sleepy. Also, I’m a freaking scientia practicalis!” Rachael turned her head back to her work. Being smarter than everyone else was a hassle.

“Alright, clever girl. Who—” She cut Lucifer off, one of the very few people that could get away with being rude.

“Desiderata. Uncle Mal gets a full sister. Woo,” she said flatly. Distracted, Rachael squinted at a few lines on an Excel

document and shifted a column, adding a priority tab.

“I get a sister?” That had Malacoda’s attention, flickering at his composure. He did that a lot more by the day, lost the sharp emptiness. Around her uncle Robin, Malacoda had zero composure anymore though. He melted like a complete puppy, much like her own father, Elliat Pitch. Anything to do with Simon had him cowering and kissing.

“Could you at least consult with me before you speculate as to the vacancy of my womb, please? Your job is to assist me,” Lucifer grumbled, but Rachael had bigger fish to fry than his petty anger. She had schedules several months out she needed to shift around, considering the news.

“I brought you the ginger ale, didn’t I?” She hit the backspace key a few times, a little harder than she should have. It signified her irritation, and emotion was weakness. *It’s rubbing off on me.* Rachael sighed. The headache settled behind her eyes and something even more important nagged at her.

“A twelve-year-old doesn’t need to be lecturing me about my reproductive status!” Lucifer raised his voice and Rachael glared over her shoulder.

“Thirteen.”

“In the grand scheme of things, thirteen is but a blink of an eye in my lifetime.” Lucifer glared back.

Malacoda glanced between them with unease. *Losing that composure again.* Whether or not that was good, Rachael wasn’t sure. Malacoda’s emotionlessness seemed more of a

symptom of what he was and not an imperative. It was a personality trait for him. For Lucifer, it was a defense.

“Blink, blink, Lucifer *Morningsickness*.” Rachael closed her laptop sharply and tidied her desk.

“You little—” Lucifer glared at her and she stared at him with as little emotion as she could summon.

“Yes, I am little. I’m a half imp. That comes with the territory. Now if you’ll pardon me—”

Before Rachael could turn her back, Lucifer hissed. “For what? You don’t simply mouth off to me and walk away!”

Rachael turned her back on him and glanced over her shoulder. “I need to be on the fifth floor at the moment. Have your ginger ale and someone is bringing you some of those seed crackers back from the media department’s breakroom.”

“Why do you need to be down there?” Lucifer’s gaze grew wary as a nerve ticked below Rachael’s right eye. The vibrating and twitching in her vision signaled her stinging headache, like all her major predictions did. His knowing gaze relaxed Rachael. She always got snippy when her power flared.

“We’ve got a lost mate downstairs getting his throat chewed open.” Rachael stormed off, leaving the two staring with unease.

“Follow her,” Lucifer muttered to Malacoda on her way out and the silent, looming shadow of black trailed after her.

“Is he really?” Malacoda’s soft voice pricked at Rachael’s ears.

“Yes, sir.” Rachael pressed the button for the fourth floor.

“And there’s a lost mate?”

“Mm-hm. He’s a pretty boy.” Rachael pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed a number.

“Ray?” a tired and grumbling voice on the other end greeted her.

“Uncle Malkiel!” She put as much saccharine joy in her tone as possible. Malkiel seemed to enjoy enthusiasm, even if he rarely could muster it. On the day they handed out apathy to the angels, they skipped Malkiel and gave him whatever was left, mostly some general malaise and a bit of sloth. But he was trustworthy. “Where are you at the moment?”

“M at Vize’s.”

Rachael rolled her eyes. At least he wasn’t making excuses anymore. He was lonely. *But not for long.*

“I need a healer. We’ve got a lost mate that’s gonna be real sick for a while. Can Uncle Vize spare a room for a bit? Pleeeeeease?” Rachael whined and Malkiel grumbled with little protest.

“Why not call Simon? He’s not doing anything.”

“Pappa’s at work with Dad and besides, I’m being spooky, mysterious n’ stuff right now. I want you to do it.” Rachael sighed and Malkiel grumbled and muttered something over the sound of a few chattering children.

“Yeah, bring him over. Vize says hello and Xander is going to insist you organize his desk again. Something about that’s what secretaries do or whatever.”

“Yes, sir. See you soon.” Rachael hung up, mind elsewhere. She tended to get major resting-butts face when distracted, and it must have shown.

Malacoda nudged her shoulder. “Is Xander bothering you?”

“No, sir. He’s just testing boundaries, and that’s important. He’ll learn.” Rachael stepped out of the elevator onto a quiet floor full of gently tickling keyboards.

“I see.” Malacoda made a noise of understanding and followed. “Only child syndrome.”

“Then have another.” Rachael shrugged.

“Easier said than done. Sometimes it takes time.” Malacoda cleared his throat as Rachael approached the office of some middle manager brownnose that liked to insert himself into every single bit of upper echelon he could, in vain attempts to suck his way up to regency. “Unless you have a bit of advice?”

“Willing to pay me a price?” Rachael cut her gaze up to her uncle, who averted his eyes politely.

“Well said. You’re growing up fast.”

Rachael knocked thrice, confidently and sharply, as they taught her to do. *The devil always knocks thrice*. Not even Elliat had the right to present himself that way.

“One moment!” A muffled voice and clattering rang out over the whimper of another, and Malacoda rested a hand on her shoulder before reaching to the door and twisting the knob in such a way that the inner mechanism snapped.

“Thank you, Uncle Mal.” Rachael offered him her brightest smile before forging in and glaring up at a frantic Sonnoth, his chin drenched in blood, the same that soaked down the chest and neck of a young man huddled in the corner, stemming from multiple bites at his throat.

“Prince Firstlight!” Sonnoth barked at Malacoda’s presence. “I was...I was...”

Rachael knelt down before the boy and tilted her head. “Jericho?” She reached out to tug at the collar of his shirt and winced. He wasn’t healing back like a demon should be, cut off from his master and power.

“Who is his maker?” Malacoda grumbled.

“Kalamax,” Jericho whispered, and Rachael furrowed her brow and reached toward his jawline, examining the wound again.

“I’ll need to take him to Uncle Vize’s. Is that okay?” Rachael glanced over her shoulder as Malacoda wrapped his hands around the demon’s throat, squeezing as he watched the life flicker in his eyes.

“Just a moment, little one.” His brow twisted in focus.

“Is he fired, Uncle Mal?” Rachael grinned. Every time that hollow ache of pain rose within her, threatening to bring tears, for the mother she’d lost, her aunt Tiffy, the thought of watching someone burn to ashes and fall away like Kieron had made her smile.

“I was going to break his neck. I’ve not done holy fire in a while.” Malacoda grinned his wicked sharp-toothed smile.

Hardly anyone saw him do angelic magic. Being half angel, Malacoda was somewhat of one himself, for what it meant.

“Please?” Rachael pouted and moved to the side so Jericho could watch. It was important he see.

Malacoda dropped the demon to the floor and sighed, giving her a wary glance. “Only because you irritate my father so.”

Rachael grinned and Malacoda loosened his tie, running a hand back through his slick hair as his great horns rose tall and threatening. The shadows of his form swarmed his body, and he grew taller, his twisting shadows engulfing him until nothing but a humanoid void of blackness filled the space where he stood. In a sweep, he brought the shadows around his body and they dissipated, their form shifting into two great black wings.

In days of old, when religious people dreamt up what they thought creatures would be, they could only imagine the thing before them, the true Nephilim, not a half-breed of human and angel but angel blood and demonic power.

“No! I swear. You can have him. His maker is dead! I didn’t... I was...” Sonnoth barely got his words out before Malacoda held his clawed hand out and grinned, white teeth sharp and threatening, while a pillar of flame shot down and consumed Sonnoth smokelessly into a pile of ash and melted cuff links. Jericho squeaked in terror and wept. Not what Rachael had wanted. Usually seeing people’s enemies burn to a crisp made people happy, didn’t it? It made Rachael happy.

“I never get to go full out.” Malacoda stretched and flitted his wings. “Robin’s going to be jealous.”

“Come out to Uncle Vize’s and fly. I like his pretty wings. Like a starling’s, all shiny and stuff and his horns...” Rachael gave Malacoda her best smile. He loved it when people praised Robin, his crown-like horns and iridescent wings, almost angelic in appearance, made for Malacoda, perfect for him, a half angel, a *Felix*.

Malacoda gave her a nod of respect. “We will. I think that’s what we need. Now get him to a healer while I go see to my father. Are you feeling better now?”

Rachael nodded. “But I’m not telling Mister Lucy I’m sorry. If I start babying him, then I won’t learn how to be tough on Xander.” She nodded sharply.

“Good girl. Keep my boy in line. You’ll be instrumental to his success.” Malacoda nodded genteelly and Rachael grabbed onto Jericho, who sank into soft, panting breaths, clutching at his neck.

Rachael swept them away in a flash of smoke and brought them into Vize’s foyer over the tile floor, away from any rug that blood could ruin.

“Ray? That you?” Vize called out and stopped at the entryway as Rachael tried to shield Vize’s view of the gory sight.

“O-oh...” Vize’s voice held a tremble.

“Uncle Vize, it’s okay. Go have a lie down. Uncle Malkiel has this.” Rachael offered him a soothing smile over her shoulder, but the angel stood there, still pale and shaken.

“No. No, I can help. I can. Malkiel!” Vize called out for the angel as he darted down the hall and returned with a few

towels. Despite how pale he was, he offered to help.

Malkiel came jogging through and waved Vize off, grabbing one of the towels as he examined the wound and brought his silvery power over his hands to push healing magic into his neck.

“There we go, pretty boy.” Malkiel frowned. “He tried to forge his magics with yours, didn’t he?” Malkiel closed his eyes and, from what Simon and Malkiel had told her over the years, it was rather like a spider’s web, surgically reconnecting threads when healing magics were involved. By sheer love alone, Simon could do most anything, and Rachael held a fierce and protective pride for her pappa.

“Jericho. Not pretty boy.” Jericho wheezed and whimpered.

“Ray!” Xander called out, and she glanced over her shoulder.

“Go on. Make sure your boss over there is taken care of.” Malkiel adjusted the man in his arms and she tottered off, reaching for Xander with a bloody hand that he didn’t seem to mind.

Chapter Three

Malkiel

Malkiel didn't know what he expected when Rachael called, foisting the duty of healing upon him once more for some inane task that Simon really should have been handling. Malkiel was more of a loner, uninvested in the well-being of others. But when he saw the mate lying there, stemming his blood from a bite that was mere moments from claiming him in a way Malkiel couldn't undo, he had to act.

The *gorgeous* boy had power in him, flowing and neutral like water, not black and harsh like demon magic or silvery and metallic like angelic. And his scent? Eucalyptus, a scent he always associated with medicine and cleanliness. The sweet malt sugar extract of a summer beer, both things he quite enjoyed.

"I've never seen an unclaimed mate before," Vize spoke softly, his voice trembling, as it often did when confronted by anyone he wasn't familiar with. Regardless of the status of injury or blood, Vize was fragile and had he not found his mate, and had Malkiel not been so stubborn, he might have bonded with the male for the purpose of having someone to care for. Anything to care for, really. He'd been contemplating getting a creature when he found one that could handle shimmering. Perhaps a cat or one of those creatures that sat on shoulders.

Pirates? No, that's the thing that held the creature...
Parrot? No... The things excrete carelessly.

“Want to help?” Malkiel cast his gaze to Vize, and he nodded, holding his hands out, still shaking a little. Navigating the threads of his magic was easy, cutting apart the bits of demon’s magic that tried to taint the well of him. Fortunately, the aggressor was dead, as the lack of spread attested.

“Thank you for letting me help.” Vize’s trembling hands did add their own bit of magic, and he was proficient with it, but he could be so much more if he wasn’t so fucking broken.

“Alright, I got it from here. Can you go get someplace ready for him to rest for a bit?”

“What about the room next to yours?” Vize blinked.

“S’not my room. It’s the guest room.”

“Okay. You stay here so much that I think of it as your room.” Vize glanced away and the cold façade that angels were supposed to put up completely failed. With Vize’s feelings hurt, Malkiel almost apologized as he walked away. Vize had that effect on people, angels and demons. He could make an angel feel true sorrow and regret. Pity even. Malkiel sighed.

“Angel?” Jericho whispered up to Malkiel.

“Fallen. You’re safe.” He scooped the boy up and stared into the blue and copper of his eyes, something not amiss on talented glazed pottery.

Whatever calliope of wonder teemed in his beautiful eyes made Malkiel shiver and immediately shut down. The sudden shift in expression must have startled the boy as his expression fell, but he still stared up at Malkiel.

He stood with Jericho in his arms, trailing after Vize through carpeted halls and oddly comfortable surroundings. Vize didn't much care for ostentation, nor did his mate. Malkiel had, once upon a time, but Vize made comfort seem luxurious. He was never afraid to stain the carpet or to knock over a priceless vase. Nothing was irreplaceable and everything was washable.

He turned a corner and Vize had the bed half-stripped down to the heathered cotton sheets and cotton knit blanket. Malkiel thoughtlessly laid him down as Vize worked his shoes off and set them nearby. "Get his shirt off so I can see if it's salvageable."

Malkiel stared at it and shook his head. "Not a chance. Just toss it and give him one of Tohu's. They're about the same size."

"Speculo?" Jericho coughed weakly, clearly having heard of him.

"Primoris," Vize corrected, easily made timid but protective of his mate and guarded. He could become brave in a heartbeat when it came to his daughter or the little demon he mated.

"Oh." Jericho's gaze wandered, pupils unfocused as they homed in on Vize. "You complement him. I can sense it." He smiled and the way his lips thinned and pinkened when he did so made Malkiel want to run his thumb along the soft surface of them.

*How long has it been since I spent my rush with someone?
How long has it been since I've even had a rush?* Malkiel

shook his head. Dwelling too long on it inevitably reminded him of *her*.

Vize gave Jericho a polite nod of his head as a soft smile broke his composure. In times of thoughtless love, Vize was rather fetching. He really had fallen, no longer a slave to his heart. Or rather, a slave to his lack of one.

“Let me see the rest of you.” Malkiel worked Jericho free of his shirt, tugging the fabric away from his slender chest, all soft, pale skin and dusted freckles. He must have been staring, caught in admiration, when Vize offered him a few damp rags.

“Oh. Right.” He reached for them and Vize made a move to help, but Malkiel halted him.

“Go see what the little ones are up to.” Malkiel waved his hand, and a sharp sting made his neck twitch. Vize stood, fingers curled, before flicking his neck sharply again, a simmering glare in his eyes that didn’t meet the flatness of his lips.

“I apologize. I meant to give you opportunity to leave to avoid stressing you further. I’m not relegating you to babysitting. You are far more than capable of assisting me.” Malkiel heaved a drawn-out sigh, finally handing over that apology. *Dammit*.

Vize nodded and stalked off, his braid flitting behind him as he did so.

“He fits Tohu so well. All the fire that he lacks but all the hidden empathy.” Jericho’s whispering voice cracked as he spoke. Malkiel said nothing as he wiped away the dried blood and tossed this shirt into a trash can.

“Who’s your mate?” Malkiel wanted to change the subject.

“Don’t have one. Not anymore. Supposedly he’s dead.” Jericho shrugged. “Kalamax.”

“Oh, Kal. Yeah, he got torched a few years back. I know where a few pieces of him are.” Malkiel’s gaze slid off toward the door, mind stuck on Rachael’s necklace before he mentally slapped himself. “Perhaps that was the wrong thing to say.” He glanced at Jericho, expecting pain, but found that same wonder hidden in the depths of his blank expression.

“What do I do?” Jericho cleared his throat and groaned at the cloth traveling the side of his face and neck.

“Lucifer might be the best place to check.” Malkiel shrugged.

“What do you think he’s going to say? And my aunt...” Jericho closed his eyes and Malkiel had a flash of lament that they retreated from his sight.

“You’ll find someone and it’ll be fine.” Malkiel traced his fingers along the healing marks on Jericho’s neck and sensed the tainted magic in the threads of his being. The pool of him sullied.

There were two courses of action he could take to untangle the binds of his magic and weave him into moldable purity once more. Like hair, he could simply cut the offending mass away and let it grow back slowly, leaving him weak for a few months as his body recouped and made itself ready to accept a demon... The other? Far less painful but less instant, time consuming, working the tangles free a little at a time.

Ordinarily, Malkiel would cut the infected area away and let new grow back. But not with Jericho.

That's what he told himself. He was too lovely to watch suffer, not in his eyes or his skin, or anything about his body, but his soul sang with innocence and wonder.

"The rest of my life will be like this morning until I can find a demon to claim me. I've lost my job now, and my aunt is going to lose her home." Jericho's eyes watered.

"Were you fired?" Malkiel's heart squeezed with empathy, something he didn't often have.

"My boss did this to me!" Jericho's voice broke, and the tears started.

Malkiel stared at Jericho for a time. "Why is she losing her home?"

"Because when Lucifer cleansed the ranks back a few years ago, my aunt's job was made obsolete and she owes seventy-six thousand dollars on a house she can barely afford. It was tight before my mom dumped me in her lap. And now I can't help anymore." Jericho choked a sob down.

"What was Luce paying you?"

"Twenty-seven a year." He sniffled.

"That can't be right. Luce has an internal policy that even the janitors start at forty..." Malkiel pulled out his phone and dialed.

"The boy okay?" Lucifer answered on the second ring.

"Hey, how are you? How's the weather? No pleasantries?" Malkiel sucked his teeth.

Lucifer grumbled.

“Boy’s fine. But I need to know something. What’s his base pay?” Malkiel turned his head as Lucifer called for Rachael and grumbled, not finding her.

“She’s here.”

“Fine. Lemme see. Jericho Wilkins, right?” Keys tapped in the background as Lucifer groaned.

“Says he’s making fifty-two base paid to...two accounts?” Lucifer scoffed and clicked about. “Send the secretary back over and get him healed up enough to have him in my office as soon as possible. ETA? Where is this money going if not to them...”

“Two, maybe three hours. Let me get some liquids and a meal in him. Anything I can tell the boy to calm him down?”

“Yeah. Tell him I’ve got a promotion and a year and a half of back pay waiting for him and that he’s going to be straightening out this accounting mess for a while.” Lucifer groaned and the chair in his office creaked.

“You’re a little under the weather?”

“That’s a whole other matter I’ll be tending with you when you get here. The secretary will probably tell you if you ask, so get her here. Now.” Lucifer hung up and Malkiel sighed.

“Lucifer has a year and a half of back pay for you and a promotion. I’ll bring you back something to drink. Hungry?”

Jericho stared openly and shook his head. Stuck in a fugue state of shock, Malkiel didn’t think explaining a lot to him in

one sitting was a good idea.

“Okay. I have to go get the girl. Don’t do anything stupid like run or something. Luce will handle it.” Malkiel stared at the boy for a lingering moment, studying him then walked away. Vize was rubbing off on him.

Following the sounds of Xander’s childish growl, his rough voice the beginnings of something deep like his father’s, he made his way to the little classroom that they’d set up for the kids. Being so close in age, it made sense to hire a private tutor familiar with demon kind.

Xander, sitting like the little prince he was, surveyed his kingdom. Kir and Zaya sat with crayons and coloring books while Moon played with Cora’s hair. Rachael sat at Xander’s little desk, rearranging his school supplies and organizing his crayons. He liked his desk tidy.

“Ray. Can I have some bagel chips please?” Xander smiled at her and she stood, brushing herself off.

“If Uncle Vize says it’s okay.” Rachael caught Malkiel’s eye and frowned.

“Xander, sorry, I have to take your secretary. I can get you some bagel chips if you like?” Malkiel’s compromise seemed acceptable.

“I got it.” Vize stood and darted off.

“Luce wants you back at the office pronto. I’ll be by later to see to him over something?” Malkiel stared her down expectantly, and she shrugged.

“Want to give me heads-up?” Malkiel raised a brow.

“Mister Lucy didn’t give me permission to say.” She gave a quick bow and disappeared with a wafting curl of smoke.

“Well, that narrows it down.” Malkiel sighed and Xander brightened up when Vize came back with a little Tupperware container full of little brown bagel chips and a smear of hummus on the side. Kir and Zaya looked up expectantly, and Vize gave them each the same thing.

Demon children started rejecting sugar early, he guessed. Cora and Moon, however, got grapes.

“They done with lessons for the day?” Malkiel peeked over at Vize and he shook his head.

“Reading and math they’ve done, but they have languages this afternoon. I think it’s French today.” He thumbed through his phone and nodded in agreement.

“French? Seems like it’ll die off in a hundred years.” Malkiel grunted.

“Probably. But we’re still doing Aramaic on Wednesdays, hmm?” Kir groaned and fired off something in another language that made Zaya giggle.

Vize stared down at the twins. “Just you wait until I tell your pappa what you said.” Vize frowned at the twins before walking out with Malkiel. They pinched their shoulders and ducked down, chastened.

Malkiel muttered under his breath, “What did Kir say?”

“No fucken’ clue. Falcalor and Gem speak some old Babylonian trader’s pidgin. I don’t even know if it’s bad unless the other is laughing.” Vize shrugged, and Malkiel nodded sagely as they headed toward the kitchen. Malkiel

helped himself to some snacks and a bottle of water for the boy.

“Never would have thought in a thousand years I’d be playing nanny to a bunch of Luce’s demon tots.” Malkiel huffed.

“I think you’re more or less at Luce’s bidding because you don’t have much else to do, do you?” Vize stared at Malkiel, those silvery eyes of his as hollow as all other angels, but Vize’s had something so deep inside them that he only saw when he was with Cora and Tohu or caught unaware in a moment of joy. Malkiel remembered those moments from long ago, back when he and his mate were still together.

“He pays me.” Malkiel shrugged.

“Pays Tohu, too. Then again, Tohu is making him a good bit of money these days.” Vize shrugged and handed Malkiel a tray for his pilfered offerings. “Now go take care of the boy. He probably needs some company. I never liked being alone much...” Vize trailed off and wandered back to the children, probably lost in his own thoughts again.

“Another broken one.” Malkiel sighed and loped off toward his room.

Chapter Four

Jericho

The angel returned to the room, his pale eyes full of thought. As empty as they kept their faces and hearts, Jericho knew there had to be so much more deeper inside them.

“You okay?” he asked, staring Jericho down as he sat a small tray on a rather plain nightstand.

“Been better.” Jericho rubbed his neck and stared down at his lap. “I’m not in trouble?”

“Why would you be?” The angel glanced up, a flicker in his façade.

He cares.

“I’m not supposed to be, am I?”

“To be what?” He pushed a bottle of water into Jericho’s hands.

“Alive. Abandoned. Here...” Jericho rounded his shoulders.

“How’s that any of your fault? Luce likes family. He holds so much love, more than I ever could.” He cleared his throat and silenced, averting his eyes.

“I dunno. The imps are terrified of what might happen to half-breeds and anomalies and abnormals.” He shrugged.
“And they really don’t like male mates.”

“I think I can safely speak for Luce when I say that *they* are the problem, not you. I’m glad Rachael found you.”

Somehow, the angel being glad that Jericho was safe made his cheeks warm.

“Thank you...er...I didn’t catch your name if you said it. I’m sorry.” Jericho’s cheeks heated even further and the angel didn’t seem to notice, distracting himself by picking at a plate with a few snack items on it. A surprising mix of the usual demon fare and sweet things. He didn’t appear to have a preference.

Jericho reached over to pluck a grape and chewed as his heart slowed.

“Malkiel.”

Jericho hesitated. “Is that a chosen name or your given? I know some fallen and they don’t give their given name lightly.”

“Given. Nobody’s looking for me. When I fell, people shrugged. It wasn’t much of a surprise. I didn’t owe anyone, just isolated myself.” Malkiel blinked for a moment, caught off guard by his words.

“Sounds lonely. But I appreciate you.” Jericho stared at the covers before reaching for another grape, brushing fingers with the angel. Malkiel pulled back as if burned. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Dredging up the past for some of my kind is a little iffy on the best days. But yeah...” Malkiel’s eyes traced the air, lost in thought as he seemed to be picking and choosing words very carefully, fighting to keep that stoic arrogance, even in a vulnerable moment. “I’m not the sort anyone would miss until they needed something.”

“That sucks. Sounds like you don’t keep that great of company.” Jericho grabbed another grape and Malkiel choked on a snort of laughter.

“I’ve been known to keep better and worse, depending on the perspective.” Malkiel grinned and to Jericho, it almost seemed like a gift, something that he should treasure and protect, that smile. Just as quickly, it disappeared.

“Hey.” Jericho reached out, resting a hand on Malkiel’s. “Don’t stop smiling. You’ve got a beautiful smile.”

“Don’t have many reasons to smile.”

“Sometimes that’s how things are, I guess. But I find reasons to smile all the time. Maybe that’ll change when I get forever old and grumpy like you.” Jericho leaned over and prodded his surprisingly solid arm. *Oooh...*

“Figured out what kind of demon you are?” Malkiel watched Jericho’s hand and raised a brow. His soft brown hair and week-long stubble elicited this strange desire in Jericho to go after him with a comb and razor. He needed someone to take care of him. He’d seen that level of disarray before in widowers. Jericho shook his head.

“Female mate?” Jericho glanced up and Malkiel nodded, his expression falling.

“Yeah. You can tell?”

“I’m a good guesser.” Jericho moved to sit up all the way and rubbed his forehead. “A dizzy guesser, at least. Woof.”

“Yeah, that’ll do it. But my mate and I parted ways. She’s moved on and had a family. More than I could do for her. It

never seemed to happen with us and we drifted apart.” Malkiel frowned.

“That can happen? Demon mates can never part if they’re true mates.” Jericho gasped softly.

Malkiel nodded. “Doesn’t seem right, does it? I changed; she didn’t. And we saw each other less and less, and one day we stopped spending our rushes together and we were done. She found someone else that matched with her magic and bound to them.” The angel seemed like he needed to talk, or at least needed someone to listen. From the fallen he knew, they weren’t the talkative sort.

“Think you’ll ever find love again?” Jericho glanced over. Focusing on the angel was so much easier than contemplating his own life, the emptiness he’d face without a mate, and the struggling he’d continue to do with his aunt.

“Eh. I’ve got eternity for someone to come along. Father knows what all else lays in store for any of us.” Malkiel leaned over without warning and patted Jericho’s cheek. His touch had a certain kind of warmth to it, and since feeling his magic earlier, every bit of contact made Jericho’s skin tingle with the memory of his magic and the slight hum of it beneath his flesh.

“Fair enough. Wiser words and all that.” Jericho beamed and Malkiel nodded.

“You feeling better? We need to get you to Lucifer.”

“I’m feeling much better. Thank you.” Jericho couldn’t make himself smile at that. He didn’t want to walk away from

the angel. He seemed sad and messy, and Jericho wanted to fix that.

“I want to see you again.” Malkiel’s words spilled free and made Jericho sit up in surprise.

“Father’s sake. No! I don’t want to see y—I need to get you a few more times after this. You’re not fully healed. I’ll need to treat you again.” Malkiel flustered, and it was delightful to watch him come undone.

“I understand. But I will look forward to seeing you, too. How often did you say?”

“Every other day for a few weeks. I’ll want to take it slow.” Malkiel sat up stiffly when footsteps echoed down the hall and Vize, despite the door being wide open, knocked and peered in. He held a young girl on one hip and clutched clothes in his free hand. The girl peered at Jericho with silvery eyes and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

“Cora, this is Mister Jericho. Wanna say hi?” Vize coaxed her, but she shook her head. “Come on, now.” She pouted and shook her head again.

“Hey, no need. My aunt always told me that I never had to do anything for a boy I didn’t want to. And if she doesn’t want to say hi, I respect that.” Jericho nodded and Vize raised a brow, tickled as the corner of his lip turned up. “I respect when a woman says no.” Jericho winked and Cora struggled before Vize sat her down. She straightened her butter-yellow little corduroy jumper, buttoned like overalls over a magenta shirt that fluttered about her shoulders.

She bounced on her little buckled Mary Janes and peered up at Vize. “Da?”

“What’s up, Duckling?” Vize melted with a soft smile.

Bearer.

“He’s got hairs like Kir and Zaya!” she whispered excitedly.

“Yes, he does.” Vize laughed as a slender tail, flesh-colored and fine, slipped from behind her and flicked curiously.

“Okay. I’m gonna go play now.” She darted off, her feet hitting the floors a little too hard, a little thundering train wreck of a child.

“That the demon in her?” Jericho smiled.

“No,” Vize and Malkiel said at the same time and glanced at one another while Vize cleared his throat.

“Angel children are rather spirited.” Vize’s cheeks pinkened, and he sat the clothes down for Jericho before smiling and chasing off in the direction that the little girl, Cora, ran.

Jericho grabbed for the shirt that Vize brought and slipped it on while shimmying to the side of the bed. Standing presented itself with issues, but Malkiel helped him to undress, his eyes traversing him in a less-than-medical way, if Jericho was a betting man, but he remained professional and even helped Jericho get back into his shoes.

“Alright. Luce will let you sit when you get there. Remember, he’s just one of us with a bad reputation. Don’t be scared, but don’t get sassy. Rachael and he butt heads often

because she needs to learn how to press back against a demiurge.”

“Thank you.” Jericho nodded and yelped when the surrounding light flared and shimmered.

“Good. Is this who you’ve been waiting for?” A rather thin and severe woman that reminded Jericho a lot of Malacoda with her dark hair and fierce green eyes, sat on Luce’s desk, legs crossed. Lucifer buried his face in her side and made a noise of acknowledgement as his hands tightened around her waist.

“Oooh, that’s what it is.” Malkiel scoffed. “Gratz, Luce.”

“Don’t feel very lucky at the moment.” Luce groaned, and the woman patted his head sweetly. Jericho couldn’t remember her name.

“Oh, Malkiel, he’s a treasure, isn’t he?” the woman cooed and focused intently on Jericho. “That red hair. Reminds me of Forneus, doesn’t it you, love?”

Lucifer groaned. And Jericho didn’t know how to take in the sight of their master being so sickly.

“Alright. Enough whimpering. Rachael, darling, get Jericho a chair. Has IT cleared his access?” Lucifer sat up and took a deep breath.

“Darling?” The half imp from that morning that took him to Malkiel raised her brow.

“Fine, secretary!” Lucifer waved a hand dismissively.

“Thank you,” Rachael sang as she tottered about and put a laptop on the clear side of Lucifer’s desk and pushed a chair up while Malkiel sidled him into it, taking far too much care, like he wanted to touch him. Maybe it was in Jericho’s head.

“Lemme give you a quick grope and I’ll head out. Send the boy to see me in a day or two. Gonna have to work it out for a bit.” Malkiel circled the desk and reached around Lucifer’s side to press a hand into his chest then lower, rocking his fingertips in a thorough and rough sort of way. Lucifer bristled at the touch while the demoness stroked his head.

“Another girl to add to the group.” Malkiel clapped his hands and whispered loud enough for all to hear. “Perhaps you’ll be less of a little bitch this time.”

“Oh, you wait until you find a mate, you simpering fool. We’ll see who is a little bitch!” Lucifer sneered at Malkiel, his red eyes completely silver, wholly angelic.

“Yeah, yeah.” Malkiel shimmered.

“I was Father’s favorite!” Lucifer shouted, and Malkiel’s shimmering hand flipped the bird as it faded away.

“Mister Lucy, did you ever even meet your pappa?” Rachael blinked up at him and he shook his head.

“It’s merely a thing I say because that’s what humans believe.”

“Then what’s the truth?” Rachael blinked sweetly.

“Whatever they believe, mostly. We’re not really certain ourselves. Best not to question it, dear. It gives you a headache.” Lucifer buried his face into the demoness’s side

once more and spoke. The girl didn't seem too fond of the endearments.

“Excuse my current dishevelment. Rachael's had a mind full of premonitions today, and I can only hope you can forgive me for what's transpired. So, I have a tax expert taking care of your amended W-2s and readying everything to help you refile. The check is right there in that envelope and I'm going to put you on oversight because it appears that some of my employees are being underpaid and money disappearing to other peoples' accounts.” Lucifer sighed heavily and gestured for Jericho to take the envelope. He'd expected a few thousand, not the forty-something odd thousand dollars written to him. His jaw dropped and heart fluttered. With that check, he could pay off his aunt's mortgage, almost. He clutched his shirt and sighed, shuddering.

“Why this much?” Jericho's mind reeled.

“Did Malkiel explain?” Lucifer raised a brow.

“Not really.” Jericho squirmed in his seat.

“So, what's happened is your supervisor was having quite a few of your paychecks half diverted into his own personal accounts and has been for quite some time. This is what he's stolen from you, plus 10 percent interest. I assume you'll find this fair.” Lucifer tugged at his hair.

“Absolutely, sir.”

“I put in to have you bumped up to seventy-three thousand, and you'll be working remote from home for a while until I can have office space for an oversight committee for payroll, which you will be running. Father's graces... Rachael,

can you handle the boy? I think I need to be home.” Lucifer glanced up balefully, and Rachael nodded, gesturing for Lucifer to leave.

“Miss Desiderata? You okay?” Rachael blinked up at her expectantly. She smiled and patted Lucifer with a consoling gesture. “Alright, all I have to do is send him home and pick up the office. Are you okay to drive, Mister Jericho?”

“Not really. I can barely stand.” Jericho’s cheeks grew hot.

“That’s okay. I’ll get my pappa to take me to your house to explain everything.” Rachael frowned momentarily. “You use our bank, right?”

Jericho hesitated and nodded.

“You’ve got another account somewhere else in case of emergency?”

Jericho nodded again, and she bobbed her head in understanding. “Wise move. I like you, Mister Jericho. I have work instructions on your desktop.” She pulled out her phone and texted rapidly while she sightlessly navigated to her little desk and sat, legs crossed primly and purposefully. For such a young girl, she had everything put together so well.

Until she had what she needed done, Jericho thought to peek into the envelope again and wheezed quietly. He placed the envelope down and swallowed hard before opening the laptop. It opened with his company ID and password easily enough, but sitting on the desktop were a few folders with dates, payroll, names, and more. A PDF document on the desktop had his marching orders. He double clicked and

scrolled through a concise set of orders informing him to investigate all accounts with certain deposit information, multiple deposit files and cross-reference each of them. It seemed simple enough. The instructions also said he had greater access to financial records. The thought of handling more than just accounts receivable made him shiver with delight. *Real* accounting. Forensic accounting. Jericho bit his lower lip, eager to dig in.

A swath of smoke twisted and broke the stillness of the office as a young male stood in the doorway, bowing respectfully.

“Mister Lucy isn’t here.” Rachael sighed.

“Oh, thank goodness.” The demon fanned his hand a bit before taking a deep breath and sighing exhaustedly.

“Why are you all torn up?” Rachael canted her head.

“I heard there was another mate. Word is that someone got smited with holy fire in accounting and the imps are absolutely raving mad with *you* again.” He rested his hands on his hips.

Rachael shrugged. “I dunno what I did this time!” With open palms, she lifted her hands.

“They say you’re out here mucking about in imp business again! The Wilkins, really?” He crossed his arms. “Do you want to get Peter hurt again?”

Rachael’s shoulders rounded. “Mister Jericho isn’t an imp. He’s a mate.”

The male stiffened. “Then we let his regent take care of it, sweetheart.”

“My demon is dead. I’ve never met him before. Kalamax.” Jericho turned in his chair to fully face the new stranger and sensed camaraderie. *A fellow mate.*

“And you had the balls to straight up walk into Firstlight looking for work?” He raised a brow, and Jericho shrugged. “Simon Pitch. Elliat’s mate.” He extended a hand, his dark locks and silvery eyes attesting to an interesting heritage.

“My aunt is half imp, mother is human. Aunt raised me, so I did spend a little time around the imps. Things got rough on my aunt since the whole security incident and we’ve laid low, struggled financially.” A sudden urge to avert his eyes made him look away, sadness permeating the room. Few admitted they were half imp, but Rachael did so proudly.

“Your aunt passes for whole, right?” Simon canted his head, and Jericho nodded.

“Well, we’ll get her in and seen to. Tohu can help, too. Luce has never had qualms with half imps.” Simon rolled his eyes.

“No, but there’s a rat in the ranks somewhere giving them up.” Jericho sighed.

“Any idea of the identity of said rat?” Simon’s voice went cold, and a compelling allure flitted about his voice.

“Isaac Bast would know better. He’s the one helping us hide.” Jericho stared up at him and the silver in his eyes made sudden sense. Every bit of emotion faded from his face. No recognition, no anger or surprise. That was a poker face if ever Jericho saw one.

“I’ve known Isaac for a while. He helped my wife and our children.” Simon strolled over and stroked Rachael’s hair.

Beaming, Rachael leaned into the affectionate touch. “Momma was your best friend.”

“Still is, sunshine. Still is. She’s just in here, now.” Simon patted his chest, and Rachael’s eyes went glassy. She wiped her tears on her sleeve and took a long breath before digging in her shirt to pull out a necklace of what looked to be silver-capped teeth, but turned out to be the tips of far too many horns. Methodically, she laid it out over the desk and slid her fingers over them, Simon watching curiously.

“Kalamax was an Apollyonic demon, right?” Rachael poked at a twisted and gnarled horn tip and frowned. She plucked it and the match from her necklace and reassembled it, stringing it back onto her neck. Jericho recalled hearing something about a half imp with a necklace of horns, and from the stories, she was much more threatening than the little girl nipping at Lucifer’s heels and tearing up over her lost mother.

Jericho nodded. “As far as my research told me.”

Rachael stared down at the pieces of the horns. “They say that a demon cannot move on from this world until the last pieces of them go back to the pit. These pieces I carry mean that those who wronged me can never be reborn. But I didn’t know Kalamax had a mate. And I saw what happened to Pappa when Daddy never came back for him.” The orange in her eyes glinted before the tears followed, and Simon rubbed her shoulders quietly.

“Mister Jericho? These are Kalamax’s. The reason you’ve not sensed him gone is because parts of him still remain.”

Rachael slid from Simon's touch and approached, holding out the bits, and Jericho took them.

"What do I do with them?" Jericho stared at the twin points capped in silver and felt a sudden hum of energy within them, one that made him squirm. From the pressure that rose behind the vibrations, he could tell it was magic, but it wasn't one he found pleasant, not like Malkiel's, and not like Vize's, either. Theirs had a flow to it, metallic and sharp, but what lay in his hands had a sensation to it that should have come with bright-yellow warning labels.

"Destroy them. When they're burned away like the rest of him, it's going to hurt. Luce knows more than I, so wait to destroy them." Simon approached and folded his hands over them, but Jericho couldn't stand it any longer and recoiled, dropping the bits on the desk with a frown.

"No problem there. Touching them makes my skin crawl." Jericho reflexively wiped his hands down the front of his shirt, trying to get the sensation out.

"I would wait to break them. It's going to feel bad when that last bit of him remains." Simon rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Now come on. I'll drive your car for you. Is your car safe or clean enough for Rachael to come, too?"

Jericho nodded and gathered his things with Rachael's help into a shoulder satchel.

"He needs to go to the bank downstairs first, Pappa." Rachael handed his bag to Simon and got her own. Jericho stood with Simon's help and leaned on him with trembling steps.

“I’m so sorry.” Jericho shuddered, and Simon fretted over him a little.

“Ahh. Malkiel *and* Vize helped you.” Simon chuckled and a shiver of magic suffused Simon’s touch and put a little sting of energy into Jericho’s step that helped him to the elevator, the bank, and into his sensible economy car that Simon seemed to approve of with a nod.

“I like practical cars.” Simon helped Jericho into his seat and walked around to get in, as Rachael made herself comfortable in the back seat.

“I like Dad’s Aston Martin better.” Rachael fidgeted as Simon buckled in and sighed.

“What’s wrong with practical?” Simon sniffed.

“Practical rarely goes as fast as I want to go.” Rachael grinned evilly, and Simon frowned.

“We’ll be having a discussion with Elliat about his driving speed when we get home.” Simon grumbled.

Rachael sulked and Simon handed Jericho his phone to key in the address.

“My aunt’s going to be asleep. She works the night shift at Firstlight Security and Defense.” Jericho handed Simon’s phone back and they drove while Rachael fidgeted with her phone.

Rachael held her phone up to her ear. “Mister Jericho, what’s your aunt’s name?”

“Cassandra Wilkins.” Jericho turned in his seat, and Rachael smirked.

“Uncle Fal! Yes, I’m alright. Yes, I know. I think I’m the one that told him... Oh. I won’t say a word unless anyone tells me to! Can I tell Pappa? Awesome! Alright, so... There’s an employee at the FSD facility named Cassandra Wilkins. Can she have the rest of the week off paid?” Rachael stared at her nails and picked at one of her cuticles.

“Oh, there’s some stuff on Mister Lucy’s end that needs to be handled. Her nephew has a target on him at the moment. Necklace-related stuff.” Rachael paused but lit with delight.

“Of course! I think that’s a great idea.” Rachael bounced in her seat a bit. “Thank you! Tell Uncle Gem I said hi and lots of loves.” She hung up the phone and smiled at Jericho.

“There. She’s got a week off and he’s sending someone to guard the house. But honestly, Mister Jericho, I think you and your aunt should stay somewhere else. Mister Vize has plenty of spare rooms and Malkiel can see to your healing better.”

“Th-thank you. So much.” Jericho’s cheeks warmed a little at the thought of being so close to the gruff angel and those silvery eyes. And his hands were so soft and warm, not that he’d had much experience being touched.

“That’s it on the left up there.” Jericho pointed, and Simon pulled into the driveway to park. Rachael hopped out and opened Jericho’s door before Simon circled around and helped him out.

The front door cracked open and his groggy aunt, in a pair of comfortable pajamas, let the door swing open, blinking out at them. “Jericho? You okay?” She squinted and stepped back as Simon and Rachael gave her polite smiles.

“Miss Wilkins! My name is Rachael Pitch, and that’s my father Simon Pitch, mate of Elliat Pitch, Viscount. Jericho’s had an incident and we’re here to help things get fixed.” Rachael beamed up politely, and his aunt stepped aside.

“Cass, please. Come in. What’s happened? Where’s your clothes?” Cass plucked at the sleeve of Jericho’s shirt as Simon shouldered him in with Rachael following them in.

“Let’s all have a seat, and we can have Rachael explain everything.” Simon helped Jericho into the small home and to the right, into a cramped living room. Cass invited them to sit and Rachael hopped up, crossing her legs primly. She simultaneously exuded a sense of professionalism and the air of a child playing pretend very authentically.

Cass sat, and Rachael patted Jericho’s knee comfortingly.

“Aunt Cass...Kalamax is dead.” Jericho hung his head at her soft gasp and whimper. They’d held out so much hope for so long.

“What are we going to do?” Cass took a shuddering breath. “With no master...Honey.”

“That’s part of the problem, Miss Cass. Someone figured out what Jericho was and tried to claim him today. We brought him to our best healers, but he’s still a little weak. We also figured out this demon had been stealing money from Jericho, and Lucifer wrote him a check for back pay and interest today.”

“It’s a lot, Auntie. Enough to get our mortgage under control.” Jericho gave her a weary smile, and she sobbed quietly.

“I don’t care about the money. How did they find out?”

“Guess I didn’t wear enough cologne or something? They found out I’d been snooping for info on Kalamax.” Jericho shrugged.

“What do we do now?” Cass covered her mouth and gasped quietly.

“I already called Falcalor and arranged for you to have a week off, paid, while we sort this out. Jericho is permitted to work remotely for the time being to fulfill his new role auditing payroll. This comes, of course, with a pay raise.” Rachael smiled. “As for security, Firstlight is sending someone to watch the house, and I’d like for you and Jericho to stay closer to the healer that’s working to fix him.”

“That’s very kind of you. And I’m not in any trouble? Jericho isn’t?” Cass fanned herself, fighting a losing battle with tears.

“Not in the least. Malacoda disposed of the demon that attacked him. Lucifer himself has ordered Jericho’s protection.” Rachael pulled out her phone, seeing to a handful of texts.

“But what will he do without a mate?” Cass blinked hard, squeezing the last tears free.

“He never got to bond with Kalamax, so he’s free to bond with anyone he wishes... It’s tricky though.” Simon cleared his throat and shifted nervously. “Rayray, can you step out of the room and not listen for a few minutes? I may say some things you aren’t meant to hear.”

“Is it something I don’t need to hear, either?” Cass tilted her head and Simon shrugged.

Rachael stared at Simon for a lingering moment, almost as if she wanted to argue, but she obediently stood and Cass offered to take her to the kitchen for a cup of coffee and a seat at their little table. “Let’s have some girl time while the boys talk.”

Simon lowered his voice. “Those two bits of horn in your bag. When you dispose of them, it will hurt. You are in a state of waiting stasis right now. Think you’re up for a bit of a bombshell?”

“Why not? This whole day’s been one lost cause after another.”

“You don’t exist.” Simon folded his hands politely and stared him down, and those three words made Jericho freeze.

“Excuse me?”

“They make a mate of an intangible object, a source of power for an eternal being. When the pits create a dragon, a behemoth, or a leviathan, they raise from power in the soil itself, created from the forces of nature. They are no more real than our mists.” Simon turned more to face Jericho as he swallowed, his heart in his throat.

“I’m human?”

Simon shook his head. “If only. You’re a blank canvas set to ‘Kalamax’ at the moment. And when you burn those pieces, you’ll be set to nothing. You’ll be your own person for the first time, and pliable. You’ve had a set way you’ve acted, molded by Kalamax’s life force, but since he died, you’ve been

spinning your wheels, haven't you? Did things change five years ago?"

Jericho shrugged. Nothing had changed aside from the imp rebellion causing problems. Should he have felt it? "But this doesn't make sense! I would have felt Kalamax, wouldn't I have? I'd have known if he died." Jericho hung his head.

"I don't know. Hold on to those horn pieces until you meet someone. Burn the pieces and immediately merge your magics. You are, on a cosmic scale, a zero. Demonic energy takes and angelic gives. You can be both. You can be one or the other. But whoever you give yourself to will mold you in their image." Simon stared down at his lap. "I figured this out the hard way."

"What happened?"

"My mate took me too soon, and I didn't feel right, so he used me and left me. I felt that empty ache of being fully attuned to him and couldn't mold to him. Left with nothing else, I imprinted with Rachael's mother. I wanted a family so bad that I took them as my own, and when the imp rebellion left everything in disarray, they left me with her babies and my mate found me once more, and we were two very different things. Which is not to say that I don't love him. I do. But we are far from perfect and we have to work hard to stay cohesive." Simon swallowed and took a shuddering breath.

"So my advice to you is that what you feel right now isn't who you will be in time. You will mate someone when you're ready and you will mold to them. It changes you. And you won't be unhappy. I promise you. I am truly loved and cared

for in all ways, but losing parts of yourself can be scary.” Simon squeezed his knee.

Jericho nodded slowly. “Then I want to find someone quickly because I already hurt. You have to know what it’s like waiting?”

“I know. But I’m warning you that it’ll be strange and scary.” Simon blinked away a few tears. “But I have three of the most wonderful children I could have ever asked for because of it.”

“Children...” Jericho rested a hand on his belly.

“Yeah. Spend some time with the little ones for a while. It helps that hollowness.”

“Little ones?”

“The kids. Vize and Tohu’s girl, our Moon and Peter. I’d say Rachael, but she’s more adult than I am. Kir and Zaya, Falcalor’s twins. Xander, Malacoda’s son. They are all tutored together.” Simon twisted his lips.

“That sounds lovely. Lots of little ones.” Jericho shuddered and sank, eyes stinging. “Does it even matter if I like who I choose or not? I just want to belong.”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Luce and Rachael know more than anyone else when it comes to the future. A scientia practicalis and a dozen oracles at the back of a demiurge, a freaking sculptor of reality, makes for the best advice. If they say you need to be somewhere, be there.” Simon cleared his throat and stood. “Now, let me help you to go gather your things and we’ll be going to Vize’s place. I’ll pick up Moon and you can get cozied in.”

Jericho nodded, and Simon gave him a one-armed hug and a pat on the back. He hesitated a moment and fished in his pocket before pulling out his phone. “Gimme your number.”

From memory, he recited the digits and Simon plugged them in, firing off a quick text that dinged on Jericho’s phone from his bag. He glanced up at Simon, still wanting to cry, but perhaps he was out of tears, or it wasn’t the time to cry. Self-pity enveloped him, and he took a quivering breath.

“I think I’m ready to be loved. I waited my whole life for Kalamax and I’ve searched so hard for him... Why did nobody tell me or look for me?” Jericho wiped at his eyes.

“Probably because the bag of dicks didn’t ask permission or register with Luce. Creating a mate is a big deal and doesn’t happen willy-nilly. From what I know so far, you dodged a bullet. I mean, you’d have been content, but you wouldn’t have been the sweet boy I see here after you two bonded.”

That gave Jericho a lot to think about. It seemed to him that keeping himself whole and finding a mate was as simple as finding someone that was okay with him as he was. Maybe it was scary, the thought of losing himself, but without Kalamax looming over him and a certain future...freedom sounded good.

“Rayray?” Simon called over his shoulder and didn’t get an immediate response. He frowned and turned, peering into the hall. “Oh.” Simon pulled back in. “Let’s go get your things ready.” Simon helped Jericho to stand and followed his lead upstairs, catching a glimpse of his aunt with a comb, going after Rachael’s curls with determination in her eyes.

“She doesn’t get much girl time,” Simon whispered as they climbed the steps, and his choked voice sounded as close to tears as Jericho’s.

Chapter Five

Malkiel

“Xander!” Cora screamed at the top of her lungs, chasing after him as he held a pillow out of her reach. She, Zaya, and Moon had created quite the epic pillow fort in the playroom, having pilfered cushions from couches, every blanket and pillow from every room they could get away with, including some off of Vize and Tohu’s own bed.

Peter played on his computer in the corner of the room, eyes roving to watch over his sister with a fiercely protective yet worried gaze.

Opposite the girls’ pillow fort, one of equal size leaned ominously for Kir and Xander. A rather well-penned sign on construction paper hung from masking tape over the entrance. *No girls allowed.*

“Xander. Share.” Malkiel raised a brow and Xander frowned, his lips twisting before he gave Cora the pillow. “Ah!” He raised a finger at Cora when she hauled back, ready to slap Xander with it. “We accept defeat gracefully, and we are kind to those who secede.”

Cora nodded, her cheeks pinkening as Xander gave her a patronizing pat on the head. “You still can’t come into the boys’ fort.”

“You’re a butt!” Cora stuck her tongue out and stomped off before searching around for a handful of haphazard Nerf darts, throwing them into their fort before diving in and opening a small hole to glare through. Her silvery eyes glinted

next to an equally glimmering pair. *Moon*. The pneumatic hiss and pump of Nerf guns preceded a volley that had Kir screaming.

“Batten the hatches, Xander! Ye’ wenchies have declared war!” Kir lobbed a stress ball squishy toy at the girls’ side and watched as one of their cushions leaned over precariously.

“Attack the starport side!” Kir laughed raucously.

“It’s starboard.” Xander’s annoyed gaze lazily assessed the situation until a well-placed *thwack* broke the silence as a single dart stuck to his forehead.

“Muahahaha!” Zaya scrambled atop the cushionless couch and posed, Nerf gun held high before unleashing a clip toward the openings of the fort until Kir shouted.

“Ow!” Kir squeezed out of the fort and stared at Xander. A pink welt marked his cheek.

“It appears we’ve been defeated.” Xander sighed dramatically before checking the little digital watch on his wrist. Malkiel did the same. It was almost five and time for people to come get their children.

He could watch them play all day, something about the innocence of their antics and the lack of motives. Angel, demon, nephil... The children didn’t care who was what. He rather liked it that way. No pressure. *Easy*.

The front door opened, the chime alerting Malkiel as he tuned in to the sounds to see who it was. Rachael’s piping voice caught his attention...and with the day they’d had, if Rachael was here, the mate wouldn’t be far behind. *Jericho*.

Cora slipped from her fort and scampered over, peering down the hall in the direction Malkiel fixed on. “Did they bring cookies?”

“I don’t believe so. Why?” Malkiel glanced back at Cora and blinked.

“You looked like Da when Pappa comes home. Like you were about to get cookies.”

“Excited?”

Cora nodded. “I won’t say anything. I still think you’re strong, even if you smile sometimes.”

Curse children and their absolute ability to notice everything.

“Strength is more than fighting. Sometimes it’s doing.” Malkiel cleared his throat.

“And you’re doing Mister Jericho?”

“Uh. No. I am healing him.”

Cora nodded. “That’s what I meant.” She poked Malkiel’s nose with her little finger, a spark of angelic magic sputtering out at the tip. He blinked and shook his head before raising a brow.

“That was very good, Cora. Very good.” Malkiel gave her a one-armed hug before she ran back into the fray of foam warfare.

As he shifted from his seat and stood, he turned, catching the rather shy and tired presence of Jericho and a sweet, little, half-imp woman locked in conversation with Rachael.

“Hey.” Jericho smiled and Malkiel gave him a sharp nod.

Their eyes locked for a wavering moment and Malkiel wanted to tell him it was good to see him, but the silence exploded into noise. A shrill screech of young lungs rose and Moon charged across the room, diving onto Xander and Kir's fort, knocking it flat. The boys struggled beneath and she wallowed atop. "If I can't go inside, I'll just sit outside." She sat up and wriggled her butt.

"Get your butt off me! Help! Uncle Vize!" Kir shouted, and Vize raised a single brow.

"What would you like me to do about this, Little Rabbit?" Vize assessed the situation. He was far better at negotiating with children, diminutive terrorists they were, than Malkiel.

"Give her a whooping?" Kir supplied hopefully, and Vize approached the scene before lifting Moon. He hid his smile before lifting the blanket and staring at a disheveled, very ginger child.

"Have I ever given any of you a whooping before?" Vize sat Moon down and gestured for her to stay before sitting Kir up as well.

"No." Kir pouted.

"Have any of your parents ever given you a whooping before?" Vize glanced between them.

"Dama smacked my hand once because I pulled Zaya's hair." Kir stared at the ground and stuck his bottom lip out.

"Well. That's not a spanking. We don't hit. I imagine that Gemory had to be very angry before he did that."

Kir nodded.

“Now. Moon? What do we say? You didn’t hit, but you don’t sit on people, either.”

“I tooted when I sat on you.” Moon glared at Kir, still angry.

Kir, ever the dramatic boy stuck in that lovely age of cooties and bravado, screeched and smacked at his clothes, tears welling in his eyes.

“They’ve progressed to biological warfare far sooner than I thought.” Malkiel sighed and Vize stared at the ground, his face stone and eyes just slightly too wide.

“Moon!” Simon gasped exasperatedly and shook his head.

“What the hell did I walk in on?” A slender image of dark hair and gorgeous blue eyes, obviously another mate, waltzed in, dressed in sleek, dark streetwear. He was a work of fine art, the other side of Malacoda’s briskness. *Robin*. His gaze bore down on Xander and brow furrowed.

“Moon farted on Kir’s face.” Xander blinked up at Robin, all keen and cunning missing from his face, turned sweet for his father.

“And you weren’t involved this time?” He seemed surprised.

“I got hit, so I was out.” He held up a foam dart as if that explained everything, and Robin chuckled.

“Why is Da crying?” Cora tottered up to Vize and patted his shoulder. Vize buried his face in his hand and stood abruptly before darting out of the room.

“I’ll go get him.” Malkiel sighed and stood, giving Jericho’s arm an almost reassuring and familiar squeeze before he jogged off just to catch Vize as he darted out of the back door and burst into snorting laughter, tears streaking his cheeks.

“What has you all nudded up?” Malkiel sniffed.

“Due for a rush and I can’t... They’re too funny.” Vize held his sides and tried, failing miserably, to hold the laughter in.

“Ah. Due tonight or tomorrow?” Malkiel glanced over Vize. His choking laughter almost made him want to share in it, laughing, too. Being what he was, Malkiel rarely felt the urge to laugh. *Strange.*

“I was hoping tomorrow but if this keeps up, I’ll assume tonight.” Vize sighed and took a few deep breaths before glancing up, his eyes bright and a look of excitement passed over his face.

Tohu’s home. Malkiel glanced over his shoulder into the back door’s window and sure enough, Tohu’s slender frame was making his way intently to the door.

“I’ll watch the kids. You two have a night of it. I’ll see if the girls want to stay.” Malkiel nodded sagely and excused himself as the two welcomed one another openly with a soft kiss that turned hungry far too fast. He remembered those days, desperate for *her*, skin flushed, like the world was on fire and for the brief few hours it lasted for the night. He used to imagine the family they’d start together. Only with Zirriel... a child never came, not for him anyway.

Not too long after their bond had dissolved, Zirriel had her first child, her mate, a strong angel, far less emotional and more invested in their society. Malkiel had just run out of fucks to give one day.

His feet silently carried him back to the den. Simon sat off to the side with Peter, working on his homework. Rachael, dropping the impassive void of expression for one of simple joy, chatted eagerly with the half-imp woman, and Jericho had migrated to one of the colorful rugs to lay with Cora and Moon while they colored, both eager to show Jericho how bright and pretty they could make something. *Where did Zaya get off to?*

Robin had left with Xander.

As if on cue, she ran in, eyes bright and skirt flipping, before she tumbled to the floor and grinned, her hands full of clippies and a glittery pink hairbrush.

Oh no. He wondered how Jericho would react, but when Zaya flopped onto his back and sat straddling his torso, he only chuckled. She snatched for his hair tie and his coppery-red locks tousled about his face in a golden waterfall. He had to stifle an urge to gasp.

“No fair. I want to play with Mister Jericho’s hair, too.” Moon pouted and Jericho lowered his head.

“Plenty enough for you all to play.” He laughed as Zaya moved over to share space, and Cora stared from them to Malkiel, her bottom lip trembling.

“No.” Malkiel held up his hand.

Cora’s silvery eyes quivered, tears welling.

“No. No crocodile tears.” Malkiel pointed sternly and Cora sniffed.

Malkiel was a few weeks off needing a haircut, his brown locks, as usual, in a state of dishevelment. The first tear welled in her eye and Malkiel sighed.

“Fine.” Malkiel sat close to Jericho and folded his legs, hunching over a bit as Cora brought out her little princess hair kit that included multiple shades of rainbow hair chalk.

Joy...

“Are we gonna have a sleepover tonight?” Cora raked a brush through Malkiel’s hair and it caught in sharp tangles. “Oh! Sorry...”

Jericho glanced over. “Cora? Would you like it if I got all the tanglies out of Malkiel’s hair for you so it’s easier? I can do it so it doesn’t hurt.”

Moon and Zaya moved so Jericho could sit up with a little unease.

“Still hurt?” Malkiel grunted in thanks when he took the brush and moved to cross his legs and face him.

“A little. But I feel so much better than before you healed me.” Jericho carefully ran his fingers through Malkiel’s hair, separated the layers with gentle working motions of his digits. The gentle, caring touch made him ache to have someone again. He caught Jericho’s eyes and stared into their swimming golden-blue depths wordlessly.

“Are you gonna kiss?” Cora patted Jericho’s arm and Malkiel raised a hand in protest.

“Hmmm... Maybe.” Jericho leaned forward and up to press his lips to Malkiel’s forehead and pecked the smallest of kisses.

Cora giggled and Zaya *awwed*.

“It’s not that big a deal. Daddy and Pappa do kissy stuff all the time.” Moon rolled her eyes and Zaya scoffed. Somewhere from within the boys’ blanket fort, Kir made a gagging noise.

Simon, eyes wide, avoided looking over as he pretended to be very interested in Peter’s homework all of a sudden.

Malkiel couldn’t make words, caught off guard at that moment.

“What happened to Vize and Tohu?” Simon changed the subject and Malkiel raised a hand, his index finger pointed up. He made a little circular gesture they often used to insinuate the rush.

“Ohhhh... Who is going with whom tonight?” Simon sighed and glanced around before patting Peter’s head lightly. He was so quiet, and Malkiel wondered if he’d ever recover.

“Can Miss Cass come stay with us tonight? They took all the blankets and pillows here for the forts.” Rachael blinked up at Simon innocently, and he nodded.

“If Miss Cass wants to stay, she’s more than welcome. I assume Jericho would like to stay with the doctor while they wait for Gem to come over?”

Rachael frowned. “Mister Vize threw me off... Now my schedule is borked!”

“What do we got going on?” Simon glanced over.

“Uncles Fal and Gem are having a date night tonight, so the twins are staying here, but Uncle Vize had a rough day and needs Uncle Tohu.” Rachael pouted and folded her arms. “You think Uncle Robin would be okay with Kir staying with Xander?”

Simon shrugged. “I can call and ask?”

Rachael nodded and Simon dallied off to call, wandering to the other corner of the room before giving a thumbs-up.

“Kir, want to have a sleepover with Xander?” Rachael flinched as Kir screeched with approval.

“There we go. Go get your bag, Kir. I’ll take you to Xander’s. You texted Fal and Gem, right, sweetheart?” Simon glanced over, and Rachael nodded over her phone. “Okay, so, Moon, you want to—”

“Staying the night!” Moon giggled and Malkiel gave Simon a thumbs-up.

“They’ll occupy each other.” Malkiel smiled.

“Peter. I don’t know what you want to do, but Uncle Robin said he didn’t mind if you wanted to come, too.” Simon’s smile didn’t reach his eyes, and Peter shook his head.

“I wanna go watch Netflix with Benton.” Peter stared down at the floor like he didn’t want to be seen.

“Alright. Come on. Since you’re not getting fun time, do you want to maybe go see a movie this weekend or…” Simon gathered Peter’s stuff, and they wandered out with Rachael and Cass.

“Hey, kiddo... Peter, was it?” Jericho leaned away from Malkiel and smiled. The boy glanced up at him with his fearful powder-blue eyes. “You were very well behaved and sweet today. I saw you keeping an eye on the kids, even when the adults were.”

Cass, playing off of Jericho, made a noise of agreement. She rested a hand on Peter’s shoulder. He glanced up and Cass blinked in realization. “You’re Coraline’s babies! I knew you two seemed familiar. It’s been so long—I almost forgot. Last time I saw you, Rachael, she’d just figured out she was pregnant with Peter and was leaving her summoner. Mages. Bleh.”

“We don’t talk about him around the kids.” Simon gave Cass a knowing look, and she nodded politely. When a human got just enough magic to summon a demon, they rarely treated them well.

“But yes, I knew your mom pretty well.” Cass hugged Peter, and he stiffened, eyes going glassy.

“Instead of... Instead of Netflix tonight, can we have a movie night?” Peter watched Simon hopefully, and he nodded, as attentive to Peter as any of his children.

“Sweet kid.” Jericho turned his attention back to Malkiel and ran a brush through his hair.

“Peter is sad all the time,” Moon said.

Cora nodded in agreement. “He misses his mommy.”

Malkiel wished there was something he could do for Peter. He tried his hardest, but the little imp was still trapped in a mind that woke in terror. Terror that he’d lose someone

close and terror that he'd wake to find him the target of hate for something he couldn't help.

"Is Peter homeschooled?" Jericho frowned.

"Yeah."

"He's not in public school? He's just around these kids all the time or adults, right?"

Malkiel nodded, and Jericho rubbed his chin. "Why not put him in school so he can make some friends?" Jericho tapped his lower lip and paused. "No, he's too withdrawn at this point... What if we get a few more half-imp kids together and do an after-school program or something to get him some friends?"

"Sounds like an idea. Talk to Simon next time you see him." Malkiel nodded and found the brush making rounds through his hair once more, this time smooth, the tangles pushed away.

"Mhm. And there we go, Cora." Jericho handed the brush back to the impatient girl, and he deflated a little at the sudden lack of Jericho's touch.

Jericho, for his part, remained as still as he could while the girls tugged and fretted over his generous ginger locks.

"How long before they get bored?" Jericho snickered.

"The maid should come get us for dinner in an hour. Then we have cleanup time, TV time and late-night snacks before tuck-in and story time." Malkiel recited off all the steps and Jericho raised his brows.

"You do this every night?"

“No. I help as needed. When Vize is preoccupied with his monthlies—”

“That means they’re doin’ it,” Zaya piped up confidently.

“Yes, thank you, Zaya. Let’s not be rude.” Malkiel waved the girl off effortlessly. He found that the bigger of a deal he made of things, the more curious the kids got. So he handled the birds and the bees about like he’d handle a toaster. *It’s not that big of a deal, but if you ask, I’m going to show you the diagram.* Malkiel had a way of describing the most interesting things like VCR instructions, and he abused that power.

Jericho smirked, his eyes twinkling as Cora did her thing. Malkiel would shave his head again soon to keep them off him. Father’s graces, Rachael had imprinted her love of hair onto all of them. He lost himself in Jericho’s eyes for a little too long and jumped when their maid knocked on the door’s post. “Malkiel. Do you need help getting hands washed?”

“Thank you, please, Luna.” Malkiel reached around to grab Cora and propped her on his hip as Luna, the trim older woman, an aging cambion, having not been privileged to or earned immortality, snagged Zaya. Moon held her hands up to Jericho and he hesitated before frowning.

“How about you hold my hand instead, hmm? I’m a little sick and I don’t want to bump your head or trip with you.” Jericho offered her a smile that she returned, holding his hand as they went to the restroom to line up and wash.

“Rachael messaged. I’m sending a tray up for the misters after we all get seated.” She smiled politely and finished with Zaya so Malkiel and Jericho could take turns washing hands

with the girls. Jericho loved children. It was plain on his face, and as a mate, he was conditioned to be so nurturing.

“Frick yes, macaroni and cheese!” Zaya bounced about and Malkiel cleared his throat with a slight warning tone that had Zaya quieting.

“Sorry, Uncle Malkiel.” Zaya dug her toe into the floor sheepishly.

“Thank you.” He nodded in approval, and Jericho helped set up the table for the kids with little booster seats and hard-to-tip-over cups of water.

They had a nice baked macaroni with kale chopped in and retired back to the den to clean up, which essentially was an hour of the girls running around destroying the boys’ fort and adding to their own.

“Can we sleep in the girls’ fort tonight?” Cora gave Malkiel her biggest silvery-eyed stare, and he shrugged.

“I don’t see why not. The blankets and all are already here. But I’ll need you to crumb hunt and tidy first. You didn’t clean up real well.” Malkiel strode toward a hall closet and handed Cora a purple-and-gray monstrosity of a little vacuum that resembled a leaf blower with a rotary end to it. She turned it on familiarly and went about dutifully searching for crumbs and bits of paper while the other girls took note and tidied things into their places, darts in cases, Nerf guns in their displays.

When all was finally done, Malkiel turned the TV on and pulled up some 3D puppy show with dog police and some

insane plot he couldn't follow. At least it wasn't that damn bald kid that cried all the time.

Jericho sat happily next to him, within a hand's distance, watching until the girls were yawning. Cora was the one to turn off the TV while Zaya followed Moon to ready their beds.

Malkiel stood wordlessly and returned with a plate of gingersnaps and what smelled like goat's milk. "And after this, we go brush teeth. I won't have any dirty mouths in this house."

"When Kir doesn't brush his teeth, his mouth smells like Da's feet." Zaya grinned proudly, and Malkiel hurried her up until one by one they filed off to the bathroom for jammies and toothbrush time. Jericho didn't even second-guess before holding a nightgown open for Moon so she could stick her arms up and let him drop it over. The frilly little princess nightgown nearly tripped her as it dragged the floor, but she loved the thing. And after that, when ten minutes into a new chapter of *The Hobbit*, they had nodded off, Malkiel turned the lights out and helped Jericho down the hall to his room before slouching off to his own.

Malkiel glanced over at his freshly made bed. The crisp sheets and sweet-smelling blanket smoothed from Luna's afternoon tidying. Little things always stayed out of place after Luna's housekeeping, and being the perfectionist she usually was, it was intentional. Little things to keep it feeling like home. He unbuttoned his shirt and hung it over a dress stand and stretched, scratching at his lightly haired chest before stepping into the en suite connecting the two guest bedrooms.

Chapter Six

Jericho

Jericho stepped into the guest quarters and gathered his things to change into a pair of gray pajama shorts and a baby blue, well-worn tank top. He liked the air on his skin but blanched at the bed. It'd been stripped of everything but the bottom sheet, all sacrificed to the girls' elaborate fort. "Dang."

He sighed and relegated himself to a chilly night of rest and opened the door to the bathroom, jumping as he spied Malkiel there with a toothbrush hanging from his mouth.

"Mh?" He raised a brow.

"Sorry!" Jericho went to step back, but Malkiel waved him in before spitting.

"Not doing anything I mind someone watching." Malkiel resumed brushing and Jericho glanced around. The shower was a rather large stall, and the toilet had a little divider around it for privacy.

"I kinda have to—" Jericho pointed at the toilet and Malkiel shrugged.

"Turn the fan on or wait for me to be done."

Jericho's cheeks went hotter than the flames of the pit. "No! I did not mean I was going to do *that!* I have to pee!"
Gross.

"Oh. Well, feel free." Malkiel resumed his brushing and a hint of amusement seemed to dance in those cold eyes of his. The brushing only made way into other ritual self-care

activities, like the washing of the face and flossing. Though, Jericho got the distinctive feeling that Malkiel was putting a bit of extra effort into his self-care. More than usual, at any rate.

Malkiel finished about the same time as Jericho called his bluff and used the stall.

“If you shake it more than twice, you’re playing with it.” Malkiel’s flat statement made Jericho bristle.

“Anyone who shakes it less than six times gets a dribble of pee in their pants for the effort, thank you.” Jericho made his way to the sink to get ready, but Malkiel didn’t leave; rather, he leaned against the doorframe to his side of the room, staring with that same lost look.

Jericho spit into the sink and went about washing his face and moisturizing. He hated his skin feeling crispy.

Malkiel leaned closer, frowning. “You’re still poorly, aren’t you?”

Poorly? Who uses that word anymore? Jericho stared Malkiel down. “This morning wasn’t that kind to me, even if you and the other angel were.”

Malkiel grunted in agreement, staring as Jericho pulled the door to his side open.

“Goodnight.” Jericho offered Malkiel a soft smile but found him frowning.

“They stole your blankets.”

“I can do without. It’s fine. The house is warm enough and there’s bedsheets.” Jericho dismissed Malkiel’s concern

and found the angel's warm hand clasped to his wrist, leading him toward his bed.

"Come. Take my blanket. I'll be fine." He gestured Jericho in and pulled his large quilt back.

"I can't take it. You won't have anything, and I'll feel bad." Jericho held his hands up in refusal.

"Want to share it? I can work on your healing a bit while we drift off? Might be nice." Hope danced in Malkiel's eyes, even if his face refused to show it.

Jericho had a thousand reasons not to share a bed with a man, from not being interested all the way to having a partner or saving themselves for the *right person*. Only, he couldn't lie. He was interested in Malkiel in many ways. He was far from unattractive and had that helpless quality that Jericho couldn't resist. Jericho no longer had a partner he was waiting for, with Kalamax long gone and there was no *right person* without Kalamax.

"Why not?" Jericho shrugged and followed Malkiel into his room. Malkiel grabbed a pair of pajama pants off his bed and swapped them for his slacks. For his part, Jericho did his best to keep his head turned and sit on the footboard politely.

Malkiel's bed told a story, a full-sized thing, a single quilt and sheet, not *completely* made but enough to look cared for. He'd worn a hollow indentation from years of sleep on the side of the bed facing the door, not the selfish wallow of a long-single male but the remaining vestiges of comfort left in someone who hated being alone. Malkiel, like Jericho, was incomplete.

“You miss her?” Jericho couldn’t keep the words from tumbling out, and the hurt that flashed in Malkiel’s eyes made him wince as if his own heart were twisting.

“Not like one might think. I’d never seek her out, nor does my heart miss her.” Malkiel shrugged, approaching the bed, his firm features not the sharp, taut things like Vize but gently sculpted, softer, and so much warmer. “Now. There’s this whole boon thing demons do when they owe someone a favor.”

Jericho nodded. “Yeah? What do you want for helping me?”

Malkiel watched him for a lingering moment, the hurt turning into a soft storm. “Until you’re healed, I want to sleep with you.”

“Like in the cuddle-and-snooze way, or are you asking for sex?” Jericho raised a brow and didn’t know if he’d be into that. Every excuse he had for his entire life for staying a virgin wasn’t a thing anymore, and Malkiel was far from appealing... but it didn’t seem right. Though, he assumed Malkiel didn’t actually mean the whole sexual angle of it.

“Sex? I’m so out of practice. I don’t think I’ve had a male in my bed since before you were a thought in Kalamax’s mind.” Malkiel shrugged.

“I’m a virgin, so I wouldn’t know if you were bad at it or not.” Jericho shrugged. He rather liked being able to be blunt and honest. Angels were like that, plain-spoken and flat. They said what they meant. When Jericho caught Malkiel’s gaze, a strange kind of heat simmered in his eyes.

Words escaped him as Malkiel approached him with purpose, equally silent as actions spoke so much louder than words. Jericho swallowed hard and leaned in as Malkiel took his hand and guided him onto the unworn side of the bed. “Relax. Sex isn’t on my mind tonight. And you’re still hurting.” Malkiel slid into the bed beneath the quilt next to him and shimmied, pressing his bare chest into Jericho’s back, holding him close. “Take a deep breath and let me work my magic? Hmm?”

“Kinky.” Jericho laughed, but the sound came out soft and at the edge of a coo of pleasure. He’d never had a male pressed into him like this before, nor one with such powerful magic buzzing at his senses. “Oh, that’s nice.”

“You think so?” Malkiel wrapped his arms around Jericho’s chest and pressed his forehead into the light hairs at the back of his neck, his generous facial hair tickling around the sensitive skin there. “Most demons find our magic unpleasant.”

“Am I a demon though?” Jericho’s voice came out sleepy and on the edge of weak lips.

“I don’t know. What were you made of?” As he spoke, the twitch of his beard and brush of his lips made Jericho whimper with sensation and squirm involuntarily.

“Behemoth’s horn and feather.” Jericho whimpered and curled as Malkiel’s magic surged and left him panting.

“Sorry. Didn’t think behemoth had feathers...”

“That’s what everyone says, but that’s what I was told.” Jericho shivered at the sensation of Malkiel’s magic, like static

and the barest butterfly kisses against the underlying current of his power within him, the deepest wells of him.

“Hmm. Well, stop squirming. I’ll talk to Luce and Lilith; they might know more.” Malkiel’s hot breath down Jericho’s neck made him shudder with toe-curling pleasure. And when his back arched, and he pressed into Malkiel...

“You like that?” Malkiel’s dark chuckle rocked his chest and Jericho relished a hardness pressing into his backside.

“Yeah.” Jericho whimpered, and his skin blazed with tender want and pleasure as Malkiel ceased his magic to draw Jericho’s hand back and down to the source of the firmness pressing into his back. Jericho gripped it firmly and paused. He grasped the hardness and pulled, gripping onto Malkiel’s... cell phone...with what must have been obvious disappointment, but it seemed a little less embarrassing as Malkiel laughed. Jericho rolled onto his back, Malkiel’s eyes twinkling with careless mirth, grinning in a way that made all of Jericho’s shame seem less.

Hell’s bells, his smile... Jericho was no novice when it came to fallen, their reserved nature. Malkiel was bad at it, full of small tells, but he was still a blank slate most of the time, and the mirth and laughter spreading over his face made Jericho want to kiss him. That smile, that laugh, it was all for him. A treasure. A gift. *Mine.*

“Calm down. I don’t know much about you, but I like what I see so far. And you’ve gone through something traumatic. Let’s let you heal awhile and see what you think after.” Malkiel pulled his phone back and tapped Jericho’s head with it. “Now let me work.”

Jericho rolled back into place and melted into Malkiel's grasp when he adjusted his arms, humming with appreciation at the tingle of magic. He couldn't really define what it was that Malkiel was doing, but just his touch alone was magical, and the scent of him, neutral, warm, and medicinal.

Gentle fingers traversed his chest, and Jericho didn't think the motion had purpose, or was part of the process, but it lulled him into relaxing.

"You said you were a virgin, but you ever been in love before?" Malkiel rested his chin on top of Jericho's head and took a deep breath that seemed to resonate with him.

"No. I kept myself distant. I knew I was meant for someone, so I didn't bother. What about you? I know you had a mate, and I assume you loved her?"

Malkiel paused for a long moment, his magic still flowing. "It's different for angels, before we are fallen, anyway. Love isn't really a thing. We're duty bound to find a partner, but keeping them is somewhat difficult when your heart changes and theirs doesn't."

"What happened?" Jericho chanced, opening an eye to peek over his shoulder and watch Malkiel's soft gaze grow distant.

"I wanted more love. I wanted to show her more and be more, to receive more, and that didn't work for her. And it was easier to just let her drift away than to keep fighting for love that she didn't want to give. She was with me for duty, not for my heart." Malkiel shrugged, and the feel of his magic changed, much like a strange flavor. Not bitter but bittersweet. *Sadness.*

“But you still have such a gorgeous smile. It made me really happy when you smiled, like it was a gift.”

“It was?” Malkiel’s magic faltered for the first time but resumed quickly enough, if a little warmer.

“Yeah. Never had an angel give me a smile before.”

“Vize smiles.” Malkiel adjusted his head where his breath, warm and steady, pooled over his scalp.

“Yeah, but they feel like they’re someone else’s. Your smile felt like you made it just for me. Does that make sense?” Jericho chuckled and closed his eyes, relaxing into Malkiel’s touch. He’d always wanted to fall asleep with someone before, warm and protected against his eventual mate. It was the thing he looked forward to the most, and Malkiel wanted to give that to him.

Chapter Seven

Malkiel

A soft chuckle woke Malkiel that morning as Vize leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, lips twisted into a chaste Mona Lisa smile.

“You know that’s creepy, right?” Malkiel stretched a little and sat up as Vize pointed toward the foot of the bed where three little girls had curled up with their blankets, all snoozing soundly. “Less creepy...but when did they come in? I left them in the den with their blanket fort.”

Vize rolled his eyes and shrugged before clapping his hands a few times. “Come on, girls! Breakfast.”

Cora woke first, her little silvery eyes joined soon by Moon’s. “Pancakes?” Cora sniffed the air and squealed.

Zaya groaned and sat up, rubbing at her eyes. “I don’t want syrup on mine. Please?”

“Of course not, little one.” Vize corralled them from the room, ushering them to Cora’s room and bathroom, but Vize didn’t go with them. Malkiel sat up and rummaged in his dresser before taking a shirt.

“It’s not like you to pay a male any attention.” Vize stared at the sleeping Jericho, curled tight and resting soundly.

“It’s not like a male to pay much attention to me and he was good company.” Malkiel shrugged and followed Vize to the kitchen to get himself a morning drink. Maybe a latte. Rachael had him hooked on the stuff. With enough sugar and milk, it was divine.

“Think it wise to be engaging him so quickly? He’s been through something traumatic and he may not have all his feelings straightened out.” Vize handed him a mug and Tohu waved from their breakfast nook, a bright and vibrant smile stretched over his lips.

“Not at all. That’s why I didn’t initialize anything. You know how it is after...” Malkiel halted his words, careful of Vize’s disposition. “Anyway. Having someone hold you while you sleep is one of the few things I know helps.”

“Malkiel? Can I be frank for a moment?” Tohu’s grin didn’t fade, mirth and amusement joined in his sweet brown eyes.

“I prefer you do.”

Malkiel wrestled a pod of some variety into the machine and smashed the *give me coffee now or I will punt you out the back door* button. It whirred to life quickly, if not with a level of perceived fear. Both he and Vize had been known to lose patience with common appliances and show them the true wrath of an insufficiently caffeinated angel.

“When one decides that they need to offer emotional support with comfort and touch, as you did for Jericho, they don’t usually involve nuzzling the back of their head.”

Malkiel shrugged, unperturbed. “I didn’t say it was for only his comfort. He’s a good holding size, fits nicely in my arms. Smells good. I miss having a partner.”

Tohu smirked and Malkiel offered Tohu a half grin, and that alone pleased the demon greatly.

“He said he treasures my smile.” Saying it out loud made it more real, and Vize fumbled a pancake, glancing over with wide eyes.

“Boy’s a natural angel lover.” Vize chuckled and Tohu shook his head, eyes closed, seemingly reveling in Vize’s laughter, before turning his head to watch his mate closely. They smelled heavily of sex, even after showering, but Malkiel had grown accustomed to the two and their strange dynamics. A repressed bottom and a hapless switch.

“Maybe. But I didn’t want to heal him straightaway. Thinking about hurting him by cutting out the bad parts... I’ll need to do what I did fairly often, slowly and carefully.”

“So you can keep sleeping with him?” Tohu raised a brow.

“Of course. It’s my price.” Malkiel lifted his chin and a warm flush lifted through him, into his magic, likely coloring his face.

Tohu sat his coffee down and shook his head, his chest twitching with polite laughter. “Malkiel, he’s a mate without his match. I suggest you handle him with a little restraint and think about what you want out of him before you carry it too far. He’ll need someone to attach to, and you need to decide if that’s you.”

“That’s quite a bit of thinking to do for someone I just met. He is a lovely creature, but he can decide if he wants to pursue something.” Malkiel sat across from Tohu, and Vize brought a stack of pancakes to the table before going back to the griddle.

“No. He doesn’t get to make that decision.” Vize’s face went cold and Tohu nodded.

Tohu sat his coffee down and reached for a pancake with his clean fork. “He’s incapable of self-choice. He can certainly consent, but he won’t be the one to ask or to take things further. He’s designed to be sought after and molded.”

“Can an angel even claim a made mate?” Malkiel blanched and Vize stared at him with a hint of disbelief across his features.

“Luce.” Vize waved his hand as if that explained everything. And it did.

“That’s quite a lot to think about. I’ll give it thought.” Malkiel sipped his drink and glanced around as the kids came running in with washed faces, hands, and teeth.

“Morning, girls! Did you sleep well?” Tohu smiled, and Cora frowned.

“No! It got windy, and I was scared and I wanted to sleep with you, but you two were being kissy and so we just decided to go bother Uncle Malkiel and stayed there.” Cora pouted but brightened when a fat pancake landed on her plate. Vize moved a jar of something dark across the table as he gave Zaya a pancake. She brightened and opened the fragrant jar. *Marmite*.

Malkiel eyed the substance warily.

Jericho shuffled in a few minutes later, his eyes so soft and sleepy, a smile across his face. “Good morning. And thank you again for having me.” He offered Vize and Tohu a quick bow of respect.

Tohu waved him off with a grin. “Consider it nothing. You helped Malkiel with the girls last night and that whole debacle.”

“‘Debacle.’” Malkiel used air quotes with the word.

“I can’t help it.” Vize’s small voice and averted gaze panged unpleasantly against Malkiel’s soul.

“Oh, it was no problem, and from what I hear, that’s normal and healthy. Isn’t that why your kind tend to live in family units?” Jericho blinked up curiously. Indeed, they did, often times two or three couples occupying a residence or a partnership of some sort to watch one another’s children in times of rush. It helped healthy families grow.

“Yeah. I’ve never lived in an arrangement like that before, but yeah.” Vize’s hurt seemed to ease and he opened for Jericho, eyes brightening.

“And honestly, you two are very well matched. I knew the moment I saw you, Vize, that you were with Tohu. Both of you are like left and right.” Jericho sidled into a seat by one of the girls and reached to give Vize a reassuring pat on his arm. It seemed to please Vize, and he offered that small smile of his.

Cora bounced in her seat excitedly. “Da, since you’re happy today, can we go flying later?” Her wings were too small to fly just yet, and her shifting wasn’t consistent, but she had the thirst for air like her fathers and Vize nodded.

“We’ll go for a flight. Want Pappa to come, too?” Vize glanced over to Tohu, who glanced up with a cheek full of pancake. He swallowed hard, lips sticky with syrup.

“Mf! Yes!” Tohu patted his chest and cleared his throat.
“Flying, yes.”

“Take Mister Jericho!” Moon bounced in her seat and Vize glanced over Malkiel and Jericho.

“Yes. Do.” Vize tied into his food and Malkiel resigned himself to a fat pancake covered in thick sweet syrup. Jericho ate his plain but stole a dip into the small river of Malkiel’s syrup for a taste and a shrug.

Vize, in a much better mood than the day before, swept around with the kids until Xander and Kir arrived for lessons, sans-Peter. Jericho glanced around for his aunt, but Simon swept through, saying something about Peter and Cass going to play with some of his cousins—supervised, of course. Jericho had never spent much time with them, as he wasn’t related to that side of the family. His existence itself was a bit of a scandal among them, and Cass preferred safety for him.

Tohu left for work, and Jericho followed Vize around at his insistence as Malkiel went to sulk on the porch. Unless Luce called, he had nothing to do.

“Hiya.” Robin’s polite bubble of a voice caught his attention. His unusual glimmering stare always threw Malkiel off a bit and mixed with his unsettling grin; today was no different.

“Robin.” Malkiel nodded in acknowledgement to the young male and glanced him over.

“Rachael is in the game of trading boons right now. I needed some information, and she instructed me that you

could use my help for her exchange.” Robin hopped up onto the porch railing and tilted his head, grinning.

“Ahh, you’re wanting to try for a second?” Malkiel nodded. Rachael could be a good help with that, paired with a Felix.

“So, what is it that you are to do for me?” Malkiel narrowed his eyes, watching and waiting for Robin to speak.

“Angels. That’s where Spooky gets it all from, all that quiet brooding shit.” Robin sighed. “I’m going to cut the whole shitty demon game and just lay it out straight. They sent a lost mate over here yesterday that you healed and there were sparks. Our kind *really* aren’t meant to be alone. It’s my job to point you in the right direction because I see something in you that I haven’t seen before. The moment that heart of yours breaks, you angels go to putty and I see some cracks. So. Since you’re a shut-in with zero prospects and he’s tabula rasa...” Robin meshed his fingers together in a big display. “Now kith.” He made a kissy noise and adjusted himself on the railing, posing in such a way that showed off just how lovely his figure was, but lovely in a very different way than Jericho.

“You want me to claim the boy?” Malkiel raised a brow.

“Eh. That’s an option. Sounds like a good one anyway. I’m not saying to do it right away.” Robin waved his hand dismissively. “But I don’t feel like that’s the path to success for you.”

“Then what is?”

“Aha! And therein lies where I can help. Talk to Luce and talk to Zirriel. I know there’s probably bad blood or some—”

“No bad blood. We’re quite civil with one another. It was an amicable split.” Malkiel didn’t quite understand why people thought leaving a partner always meant hate.

“I think that even temper of yours will do you well. But I don’t know any regency who wants a mate that I would trust to have one. Neither does Luce.” Robin bit his lower lip in thought. “You’re actually my first choice, too. We all agree, really.”

“Huh.” Malkiel tented his fingers and frowned. “He’s too eager just yet to find someone to claim him. He’s scared, and I don’t want him to chase me in desperation.”

“I appreciate your tact. But how long you wait will be inconsequential when he’s ready. Remember that he’ll be perfect for you.”

“Perfect for me? Why does he have to be perfect for me? Why don’t I have to change anything? Why are you handing me this boy that is so willing to sign his life away for that bit of protection? I’m not a good partner, Robin. I’m quite terrible, in fact. I left my mate to struggle with the household chores, ignored her, got wrapped up in my own head constantly, and I shudder to think what I would have put her through if I had succeeded in giving her children.” Malkiel shook his head in dismay, the icy edge of him breaking through.

“And yet you’re here all the time. You wake with Cora sleeping at your feet. You help them brush their teeth and do their lessons. I see you, Malkiel. And when Xander broke a feather a few weeks ago and was bleeding and upset, who helped him pluck it? Who washed him up and who patted his

back until it stopped hurting?” Robin crossed his arms and narrowed his gaze.

“I hardly think that’s much at all. It was only to quiet him.” Malkiel rolled his eyes.

“You’re here and you do so much that we refer to you as Vize’s wife, you know?” Robin snorted and Malkiel frowned.

“That doesn’t make me want to act on your advice.”

“Fair is fair. But I made a promise I’d try.” Robin sauntered up and rested a hand on Malkiel’s shoulder. Magic tingled between them, his Felix gift, much like Malacoda’s power, neither angelic nor demonic strictly but rather one then the other, alternating. “Come what may. Luck is on your side.” Robin squeezed his hand and disappeared in a wisp.

“Well, shit.” Malkiel leaned back in his chair and stared up at the porch ceiling and pondered. “Luce? Zirriel? Why do I have to talk to people? Jericho’s at least easy. He gets it, goes right with the flow.” Malkiel frowned. “Fuck it.” He texted Rachael.

Luce up for a visit?

He stared at his phone as he walked back in and found Jericho in the den with the kids, on his laptop, poring over files.

Yep. He’s got thirty minutes. Rachael texted back.

“Vize, Jericho, I’m heading out to see Luce. Either of you need anything?” Malkiel glanced between them.

“Yeah, if you swing by the coffee place, can you grab me one of those green tea things?” Vize looked up expectantly.

“Yeah. Want me to go give Tohu a kiss while I’m there, too?” Malkiel stared Vize down and the angel huffed, rolling his eyes. It was too much fun messing with him at times.

“You’re going to Firstlight? Ooh, can I get one of their sour iced teas? I like the grapefruit one.” He fished in his pocket. “Lemme get you some cash.”

“No worries about it. I put it on Luce’s tab.” Malkiel nodded to them and shimmered, arriving in Luce’s office. He didn’t look too much better than the day before, poorly and withdrawn.

“Fuck off, Malkiel. I’m busy.” Lucifer buried his head in his arms and sighed heavily.

“What got into you?”

“Rachael, do *not* answer that.” Lucifer glared over at the little girl who stuck her tongue out at Luce and continued tending to something on the computer.

“We having problems?” Malkiel slid up to the desk and sat in one of his chairs before throwing his feet up onto his desk blotter.

“No, I’ve messed up my schedule and I’ve inconvenienced Malacoda and his mate yet again when they needed a sitter for Xander. And yes, while I’m happy about this, I’m not particularly prepared for it. It’s been nine-hundred years! Why now, of all things?” Lucifer sighed heavily.

“I know,” Rachael said in a singsong voice, chuckling.

“Can it, imp!” Lucifer grabbed an empty soda can off his desk and chucked it in her direction, purposefully missing her by a mile.

“Enlighten me, Rachael. Anything that pisses off old scratch here is sweet music to my ears.” Malkiel flicked a brow at Luce.

“He stomped around whining that he wanted another baby around Robin and you know how that works with him.” Rachael snickered.

“And now I owe him a fucking boon!” Lucifer growled.

“Robin has everything he could possibly ever want. And he’s so low maintenance.” Malkiel laughed. “What is there to get him?”

“I don’t know!” Lucifer sighed.

“I have an idea that will benefit us all.” Rachael beamed up at Lucifer and brought a few sheets of paper to his desk. He glanced over them for a lingering minute.

“Don’t we already have something like this?” Lucifer glanced over at Rachael.

“Nope. Xander will need to be around other kids his age, demons and the like. I think starting the school for his sake would be a good gift for Robin. He’s worried. And also, Peter needs friends and a lot of the half-breed kids can’t get into the demon schools unless they’re cambion and less than a quarter human.” Rachael frowned.

“So you want me to start a school for the half imps and mixed races so we can work on unity and increase Xander’s chances of success by putting him in a position to gain power early?”

“How else do we make hybrids and half-breeds become more equal? If Malacoda, *you*, and Falcalor are willing to send

their children to school with my kind... I can start some rumors to make it some dastardly plan to bring Xander into power.” She stuck her tongue out and Luce paused, picking up his phone. Instead of an answer, a wisp of smoke brought forth Robin.

“The Felix! Come. I have a proposal for your payment.” Lucifer snapped his fingers and sat up straighter, his red eyes in place once more, keeping his glamour on.

Robin bowed at the waist slightly and closed his eyes. “What have you decided, my favorite father-in-law?” Robin glanced up, no mirth in his eyes, just curiosity. The boy had Lucifer pegged and could walk all over him as easily as Simon and Rachael.

“I’m going to start a school that allows hybrids and mixed-race children in so we can set Xander up for power. He’s had his tutors, but he needs to gain his following.” Lucifer glanced up and Malkiel had to turn away and stifle a snicker. One of his eyes had gone back to silver. His exhaustion showed, but Robin said nothing, just gave Lucifer a polite yet knowing smile. “This is a very generous gift, my lord. Thank you. I am very pleased, and for all the good it will do, it more than makes up for any interest you think you may owe.”

“So we are in accord?” Lucifer fixed Robin with his gaze.

“Yes, sir. I am most pleased.”

“And I once again apologize for putting off your vacation.” Lucifer sighed heavily.

“I grew up my entire life without the fancy stuff. I can wait a little longer for Hawaii.” Robin smiled and approached, circling the desk. “Come on. Hug time.”

Lucifer balked and stared at Robin with disgust.

“Nope. Won’t hear it. Come on! Hug time!”

“I refuse.”

Robin leaned in and hugged Lucifer around his shoulders. “There. Keep Malacoda updated, please. He’s excited to have a sister.” Robin pecked a kiss on the side of Lucifer’s forehead and teleported as Lucifer swatted him away, growling.

“You’ve changed a lot, Luce.” Malkiel snickered. “The old you would have burned him to a crisp.”

“The old me didn’t have this much love in his life or this much to lose. And it’s hard. You’re figuring that out, too. I think I was the first to break the shell of my heart, but Vize’s the only one that’s managed to do away with it. You’re getting there, too.”

“Speaking of. I’m supposed to be talking to you today about the boy I healed?”

“Jericho,” Rachael supplied, and Lucifer waved her off with a buzz of annoyance.

“Right, the one in accounting. The mate that’s fixing all the shit that Sonnoth left me to deal with.” Lucifer sighed heavily. “Do you want him? We all seem to think he’d do well with you.”

“He’s certainly nice enough. He’s pretty enough. He’s attentive and sweet.” Malkiel shrugged.

“Good. He holds two pieces of Kalamax, his maker. When he destroys those pieces, he’ll be vulnerable, so claim him. It’ll be a hard few days of something between a rush and a heat. And this is to go no further. I’ll show you how it is that I’ve taken my mates.” Lucifer took a slow breath and hung his head. “Because once upon a time. *I* was a created one.”

The bottom fell from Malkiel’s stomach and his skin prickled. “What?”

“I didn’t stutter.” Lucifer glanced over and Rachael made a show of gathering her things before wordlessly leaving the office with a polite click of the door. “Smart girl.”

“How—” Malkiel swallowed.

“Because the first person to try making a mate was an angel, one too powerful, one that clashed with every partner he tried, so he cultivated me.” Lucifer smoothed his hair back and let the silver of his eyes glimmer. “My powers are so much different, aren’t they?”

“Demiurge...”

“I was made of two things, not one. As a demon gives part of his being to create a mate, an angel gives a f—”

“Feather...”

“And we know two things. Jericho is a mate, and they made him of a behemoth’s horn and feather...” Lucifer quirked a brow. “I was made of my mate and the first leviathan.”

“What happened to him?” Malkiel trembled.

“I was created to love, to worship my mate, to be perfect and powerful. To complement him in all ways.” Lucifer scoffed. “I am angel. I am created of angel but forged by the pits. And he wanted children, which I failed to provide... And I saw him make more mates for himself that broke or failed because of my bond. I tolerated it because he was mine, until he broke our bonds, discarded me, and when I was free of him, I could see all the evil he did. And I saw all the love the demons had.”

“And the demons welcomed you?”

Lucifer nodded. “They saw power, and my shattered heart. And my former mate spread rumor of my evil, inadvertently giving me power, and I took for myself Lilith, one like myself. But we were two broken mates, and our hearts are bottomless and needs are insatiable. We are greedy and wanton. I am a demiurge, which means I shape the very nature of reality at my whim. Which is how I know with my little scientia practicalis, my eroscientia, my Felix, and my oracles...that there is none out there for you. You only had one match, and she’s moved on. There might be other mates come along unclaimed, but I doubt they’ll be as perfect for you as Jericho.”

“I see.” Malkiel’s dry throat itched, and he cleared it, his ears ringing.

“Take a deep breath and think. Make your peace because he’ll change when claimed. Only, we don’t know how.” Lucifer picked at his eye with his forefinger, blinking into the light, a practiced gesture to disguise his unease.

“This is a lot, Luce.” Malkiel ran his fingers through his hair and frowned. “But I’ll keep working to heal the boy. If he asks and means it and knows the risks—I’ll do it.”

“Good. I need you to have a heart-to-heart with Zirriel over this, too.”

Malkiel bristled. “Why?”

“Easy. She’s got kids. I’m not looking to attack her. I’m looking for answers.” Lucifer pushed a pen across his desk. “Because Kalamax and her had financial ties. And, I’m guessing she had something to do with that feather. And Sonnoth had been attempting to make contact with her for a while.”

“There’s no chance that he’s a demiurge, is he?” Malkiel glanced up, paling.

“No. He’s probably a guardian or a power. Maybe a cherub? But there’ll be some demonic element, so depending on which of the three, he could manifest as that plus temptate, elemental, or possibly something new.”

Malkiel nodded sagely. “Who was your maker?”

Lucifer snorted. “Like I’d tell you. But he’s long dead. You leave enough abandoned mates behind and you paint a target on your back.”

“Does it have anything to do with how we all were made?” Malkiel swallowed hard and glanced up.

“No. I’ll be honest with you on that one, Malkiel. We’re an entire race of tulpas. Because humans believe in us, we exist. Because they believe I am this first fallen, this ruler of hell—I am.” Lucifer shrugged.

“Well, that’s refreshing. I’m a tulpa, a figment of mass imagination. And there’s no father?”

“Perhaps in some other reality? But here? A tulpa can’t be more powerful than the collective of its creators, so they can try as they might, but the idea of a father is the best they’ll ever do.”

“Exactly. The stronger a demon is, the farther his lore goes back. That’s why the most noted angels are the strongest, because people believe harder.”

Malkiel sighed softly and stared down at the floor. “I’ll take the boy if you’ll give me time to win him over. But you’ve entrusted me with a great secret, and far from the employment you give me, you’ve put me in a precarious spot. And we are basically under demonic law, are we not?” Malkiel sat up and leaned forward, catching a wary glance from Lucifer.

“And you want a boon, too?” Lucifer groaned exasperatedly. “What do you want?”

“You own enough media and publishing companies to run some experiments, yes?”

“No need to repeat them. I know where you’re going with this. Sure. A few book series, some of those angel tarot cards, and a web series ought to give you a boost.” Lucifer sighed in relief. “Anything else?”

“No. Give me time to do what I need to. Want me to wait until before or after he gets through your financial stuff?”

“Thoughtful as always, brother. I’d prefer after. I’d like to get my employees paid accurately, but fate has other plans

sometimes.” Lucifer waved his hand dismissively, and Malkiel shimmered with much on his mind.

Chapter Eight

Jericho

Zaya and Moon returned home that afternoon to be with their families, leaving a lonely Cora who dutifully helped do all the evening cleaning while her fathers tended to the rush, which apparently could last two to three nights, ebbing during the day. Angel heats were weird.

Malkiel took over putting Cora to bed, whining and dozing off even before story time. Hopefully she'd sleep through the night? Jericho had other things on his mind, things that made his cock ache as he washed himself and got a little creative with his razor. Being a bearer, by design, he tended to have a lot less body hair and softer features, so it paid to trim everything up neatly.

Malkiel barged into the bathroom unannounced, working at the sink to do his evening maintenance. "How'd work go?"

Jericho almost missed the question and spluttered water. "Fine. Sonnoth was messy, which works to my advantage." The translucent upper part of the shower curtain gave Jericho a hazy view.

"That's good. I see you got your blankets back on your side." Malkiel spoke around dental floss and rummaged in a drawer before the light hum of a razor perked to life. Jericho peeked around the curtain and stared, watching him stand there shirtless, sculpting the scruff of his beard. To say his work was inexpert was an understatement.

“Yeah, but I have a price to pay. Also, do you want me to help? I volunteered at an elderly home for a while and got pretty good cleaning up beards.”

Malkiel met his eyes in the mirror and his eyes went dark, predatory, almost. “Sure.” He laid the razor down and turned before moving to sit atop the bathroom counter, watching as Jericho rinsed himself off and held the curtain chastely while reaching for a towel. When he stepped out, towel around his slender hips, Malkiel’s gaze traveled over him.

Before he could lose his nerve, Jericho approached, reaching for his electric razor and clicking the guide into place. Malkiel’s face was a little less round than the facial hair he’d cultivated suggested, and those lean lines might look better sculpted, and so Jericho stepped into Malkiel’s personal space between his legs and leaned in. Malkiel’s skin lit up with a soft glow and Jericho paused, wondering over it. “What’s this?”

“Angel thing. It’s our glory. We glow when we’re happy or aroused or excited.” Malkiel shrugged it off, but Jericho perked up at the second of those. *Aroused*. It only took a minute longer for Jericho to finish his beard and trim his eyebrows lightly. Malkiel was absolutely devastatingly beautiful with a little maintenance.

“Malkiel?” Jericho put the razor down and ran his fingers through the angel’s hair, bringing their faces together because something about Malkiel was too magnetic.

“Hmm?” Malkiel leaned in and brushed his nose over Jericho’s temple, and, from the soft breath and skin that accompanied it, his lips, too.

“I don’t want there to be any misunderstandings. I am very attracted to you, and you know that I need to be claimed. Don’t you?”

“Is this you asking me to claim you?” Malkiel brushed the scruff of his newly sculpted beard over Jericho’s forehead. The sensation drew goose bumps across his skin as he thought about those prickles over his body, down his belly, his thighs. Jericho shuddered.

“Potentially? It’s me saying I’m interested, and that’s my goal. I don’t want to play around and you need someone to take care of you.” Jericho grabbed a handful of hair in each hand and pulled Malkiel’s face down to brush their lips. All the while, his glow grew brighter and Jericho’s cock stiffened.

“You’re very lovely, but I am a rather challenging male to care for. I wouldn’t wish to do things you’d regret.” Malkiel kissed Jericho’s lips and pulled him in, his cock firm and pressing into Jericho’s belly.

“Your cell phone again?” Jericho parted his lips, inviting Malkiel in, unsure of what to do next but melting under the slightest peek of tongue and sweet mint.

“Nope. That’s my dick.” Malkiel chuckled darkly and inhaled long and slow, as if he wanted every bit of Jericho he could take, but taking his ownership slowly, the kiss progressing with more tongue a little at a time.

“Will you take me, Malkiel?” Jericho pulled free of the kiss and panted softly.

“Eventually.” Malkiel brought him up for another kiss and groaned into it. “When you’re ready. I want you to be very

certain I'm the right one. Not the first one that came along."

"Tease."

"I didn't say we couldn't fool around a little." Malkiel drew his hands up Jericho's back and flinched as a shrill cry of anger echoed from the hall.

"Uncle Malkiel!" Cora cried, her voice full of venom and ire, extinguishing his glow immediately, both of their cocks wilting.

"Yes?" Malkiel hesitated.

"Everyone is doing kissy time, and I had a bad dream." Cora whined from outside the bathroom door and Malkiel rolled his eyes, the hint of a smile twinkling in their depths.

"Coming." Malkiel slid off the sink counter and opened the door. Cora squinted up at him with a pout.

"It sounded like you was doing kissy time." She stared at Jericho warily.

"It did? It was bath time before bed." Malkiel patted her head and she tottered over to the bed and hopped up, dragging her blanket and pillow with her.

Cora snuggled in and Jericho climbed in after Malkiel, snuggling into the covers.

"Comfy there, girl?" Malkiel reached down to pat over her head.

"Mhm." She wriggled and snuggled over the foot of the bed, curling between their feet rather than crawling between them, still letting Malkiel spoon warmly against Jericho, sans cell phone or anything else suspiciously amorous.

“What about you, Jericho?” Malkiel made a point at whispering over his sensitive ear and Jericho shuddered.

“Maybe a liiiittle uncomfortable,” he admitted.

“It’s okay, Mister Jericho. You can have my pillow if you want.” Cora sat up and tried to push her pillow toward Jericho.

“No, you keep it. I’m being fussy.” Jericho chuckled.

“Okay.” She snuggled in and after a few long moments curled together, her breathing steadied and Malkiel pulled Jericho’s face over to grin at him in the dim light. The simple gesture stole his breath as much as the tender kiss that followed.

Jericho woke, the heavy weight of Cora sprawled across his and Malkiel’s legs, an arm thrown over his waist, and the gentle tickle of breath down the nape of his neck. A strong, statuesque male stood in the door, arms crossed, watching. *Vize.*

“Morning?” Jericho wriggled and Malkiel groaned, gripping tighter.

“Morning, Jericho. Do you mind if I nab my daughter? I didn’t mean to intrude, but the door was open, so I assumed there was nothing going on.” Vize’s face transformed into something so lovely when he scooped a sleepy Cora up.

“Da. N’wanna sleep in,” she whined and Vize shushed her quietly. “You can go back to sleep after breakfast if you want.

Okay? I made breakfast ice cream sundaes.”

Cora’s eyes went wide awake. “With waffles?”

“Mhm. And there’ll be some leftover for whenever you two want to come down. I’ll keep Cora occupied. Thank you.” Vize swept out, bouncing Cora on his hip as she grinned excitedly. He loved her so much. The door shut behind him and no sooner than it clicked into place, Malkiel was snuggling into him tightly, pressing his hips flush as a hand snaked down the front of Jericho’s chest toward the hem of his tank top.

“Good morning, Malkiel.” Jericho gasped and curled into his touch as Malkiel’s hand pulled upward, exposing Jericho’s belly and chest where he toyed over the smooth skin there.

“Morning. Is this okay?” Malkiel brushed his fingertips up toward Jericho’s collarbone and down again, avoiding touching his nipples or going past his navel that he circled with a feathery touch.

“More than okay. I don’t want you to stop.” Jericho gasped softly as Malkiel shifted to roll Jericho onto his back, caging him in to kiss him. Jericho worried about morning breath and whimpered before melting into Malkiel’s touch. “Please...”

“I need some time to make up my mind, and so do you, but let me show you how well I can care for you in other ways.”

Malkiel said he was out of practice, and honestly, Jericho wouldn’t know, but as he kissed down Jericho’s throat and traced a fingernail over his pebbled nipple, his cock seemed

pretty sure Malkiel knew what he was doing. “No complaints.” Jericho stifled a noise of pleasure that radiated through his body as Malkiel replaced his tracing fingernail with his soft lips and a tender suckle, drawing Jericho into a shiver of tense pleasure that ended with a jolt and whimper. The flats of Malkiel’s teeth came down over the pert nub and white-hot pleasure shot through him, as bright in his mind as the glow on Malkiel’s skin.

Jericho twisted and writhed under Malkiel’s traveling mouth to nuzzle the sparse hairs of his groin as his waistband slipped down, mouth open to welcome in Jericho’s cock, sucking him in with warm, tight ease.

In his twenty-five years of life, Jericho had never felt anything like what Malkiel did. The sensations of his curling tongue and wandering hand made Jericho’s skin grow cold. “Malkiel,” he breathed with a whimper.

Malkiel hummed as his head bobbed, tongue doing unspeakable things while a warm and soft hand caressed the underside of his sac, palming him as they rode up tighter and higher. And with a final curl of his tongue, Malkiel drew a shuddering cry of pleasure that dissolved into an odd sort of laughter out of Jericho, swallowing as pent-up waves of seed spilled into his mouth.

Jericho trembled as Malkiel licked him clean and tucked his shorts back into place. The dim glow of his skin made Jericho’s cheeks burn with flush and the only noise he could make was a whimper.

“Better?” Malkiel kissed right below Jericho’s navel and pulled himself up with that smile that he put on only for him,

the gift. Jericho pulled Malkiel in thoughtlessly as he tasted the rich saltiness of himself on Malkiel's tongue. With a soft kiss to seal the exchange, Malkiel pulled away, leaving Jericho limp and disheveled in the sheets.

“So much.” Jericho shuddered as his muscles refused to work, all complacent and boneless, body keening for more.

“Good. Cora will want to watch Saturday morning cartoons with us. Let's clean up or we're going to miss waffles.”

“Waffles sound good.” Jericho scrambled to sit up and sighed. “That was nice... You sure there's not time for me to reciprocate?”

“There will be time, eventually. Come.”

Jericho followed Malkiel dutifully, giving himself a quick wipe down with soap and a rag while the angel brushed his teeth.

“I'd already said I'd give myself to you. You draw me in, and I've never really felt good about a male before you. And from what Simon tells me, it won't matter. It'll be perfect. There's no need to try to woo me.” Jericho laughed and Malkiel watched him with a lingering gaze. With a quick hop, Jericho sat on the sink counter and grabbed for his toothbrush.

“I know you'll change. I need a little longer to know you. Because if you're what I really want, I don't want you to change. You feel good, too. Too good. And that terrifies me, little mate.” Malkiel spit into the sink and sidled up to Jericho.

Mate. The word made a shiver of power flow through Jericho in a way nothing else had, like his touch, silken and

full of the silvery magic that curled about his senses. He craved purpose, and Malkiel sat there taunting him with it.

Malkiel halted in his motions, eyes wide as he stared, lips parted. Wonder, plain as day, dominated his face, and he pushed into Jericho for a fierce kiss, his hands snaking to wonderful places. Malkiel's fingers crushed into Jericho's locks, while his other palm spanned his back, scooping to cradle his bottom. The fierce glow over Malkiel's skin made Jericho's eyes sting and, even through his lids, the brightness of it flowed. "Malkiel."

"What are you? What will you become?" Malkiel stopped Jericho from responding, seizing his mouth until he could sneak to Jericho's neck, nipping and suckling wantonly until he keened. "Jericho... You're too tempting..." Malkiel groaned and held Jericho for a moment, evening his breath.

"Why? You've not claimed me, so why are we like this?" Jericho shivered and Malkiel swallowed hard.

"I don't know. But I know we'll be perfect together."

Chapter Nine

Malkiel

Malkiel watched Jericho carefully, waiting for a sign of nervousness. The boy was desperate to belong, to do what they made him for, anything, but continue on with his purposeless existence.

“And that terrifies me, little mate.” Malkiel had to catch himself from stumbling, his heart on fire for an instant when a soft glow cast itself over Jericho’s skin. Not Malkiel’s, not a reflection. Jericho’s skin brought forth a soft light, golden almost, faint, over his flesh that drove Malkiel mad with desire. Nobody had glowed for him since Zirriel, hundreds of years ago. Staring at the boy sitting there, equally enamored with him...he could swear he knew a wholeness he’d not before.

“Malkiel,” Jericho whimpered, his voice a plea that if Malkiel took it any further, there’d be no return. After all, Malkiel promised he’d wait. Though his demanding hands prayed to break that promise.

Malkiel kissed Jericho silent and pushed into his neck, kissing, teasing him with tender little nips. With every passing second, Malkiel’s cock grew harder, demanding satisfaction. How long had it been since he had a partner? A decade or more? He vaguely recalled *Star Wars* being a new thing and the encounter being *less*. He did that occasionally, convinced himself that a warm body could fill the void. Was it a male or female? He could recall vague images of bellbottom jeans...

No, that was the seventies... But none of that mattered any longer because with but a few pleasantries, this boy could be his.

One question remained though... How was Jericho glowing? As far as Malkiel knew, he had to destroy the last pieces of Kalamax's horns, to claim him, to... The boy was demon, wasn't he? But there was what Luce had said. The feather, Zirriel...

"You say you need longer but you feel like you're about to cum in your pants." Jericho's breath shuddered, his little shorts tented prodigiously, streaked with dark drops of precum.

"It's going to take a small miracle for me to pull away here." Malkiel dug his fingers in, drowning in Jericho's scent as he nuzzled deeper, taking in the soft feel of his hair.

"Uncle Malkiel!" A tiny fist pounded the door.

"Small miracle?" Jericho trembled, eyes glossy and pupils blown wide.

"What is it, Ducky?" Malkiel put on a very calm and patient voice.

"Stop kissin' Mister Jericho! It's waffle time!"

A deeper muffled voice interrupted her tirade, Vize scolding her.

"But they're kissin' in there!" she whined.

"Good! Maybe Uncle Malkiel will be less grumpy if he gets kisses." Vize sighed patiently, full of endless love for his baby girl.

“I’m not grumpy!” Malkiel rubbed a hand over his face and backed up, all signs of his erection faded. He rummaged around for a pair of slacks and stepped out of his pajama pants before forging his way out, still wrestling into a T-shirt.

“I’m sorry, Malkiel, but she’s being rather insistent. She won’t eat until you two are there.” Vize gave Malkiel a pleading look that melted his annoyance. Cora stomped her foot and glared up at him.

“Alright, alright. Let’s go.” Malkiel sighed and turned when Jericho stumbled out, working his shirt into a French tuck on his jeans.

“Yay!” Cora bounced and hugged Jericho before grabbing his wrist and running off.

“Please tell me you got to have a little fun before she came knocking?” Vize gave him a sympathetic glance.

Malkiel grimaced. “I got the boy taken care of, but I’ll have to wait for mine. But strangest thing...he was glowing earlier.” Malkiel spoke so quietly. “How?”

Vize paused in his step and glanced at Malkiel, a nervous expression dominating his face. “Well. You’ve felt his power, right? An unclaimed mate has power tuned to their regent.”

“His power doesn’t feel angelic or demonic. It’s neutral like water. You felt it, too, so you know.” Malkiel rubbed at his jawline and tensed when Vize reached out to touch his face for a second, brow furrowed.

“He did a good job on your beard, that’s for sure.”

Malkiel swatted Vize’s hand away. “Stay on topic.”

“That was on topic. He’s too drawn to you, and I noticed it almost the moment I saw him. Despite his state, he felt like he was yours.” Vize canted his head and his silvery eyes twinkled, a smile creasing the edges of them.

“You know what his power reminds me of?” Vize strolled away, purpose in his step as he caught Cora’s twinkling laughter.

“Hm?”

“A fledgling who hasn’t come into his power yet.”

Malkiel froze, his mind a rush of emptiness, only desire and a sudden need to reach out to his former mate. Eighty years? Last he saw her, half the world was up in arms and the toothbrush mustache was rapidly going out of style.

“Hey, Vize. Think Cora would mind if I—”

“Go handle what you need to. If she gets fussy, I’ll give her a comb and Jericho can handle her.” Vize gave Malkiel a rather sweet smile and nod before he faded from view, the world around him a much different place than it once had been.

The house had more woodwork and chimneys so long ago, but Malkiel couldn’t complain. The Tudor-style home bore signs of renovations, more than once from the looks of it, meeting a more modern standard of what it had been, and the scent of angelic energy perfused the place. She’d not moved.

Malkiel’s stomach knotted, and he approached the door, ringing the bell once. He tucked his hands in his pockets and debated leaving when nobody responded. A distinct lack of lights visible through windows made him wary of the place, so

he turned, ready to shimmer away once more. He could try again some other ti—

“Malkiel?” a silken voice purred as a shimmer finished, the petite form of his former mate coming into view, her cold gray eyes like heather. She wore a salmon-colored sweater and trim burgundy leggings, but what caught his eye was a slight little boy with fierce silvery eyes and blond hair all stuck up at odd angles. He clutched to her leg and glared up at Malkiel suspiciously.

“I meant no disrespect in trespassing.” Malkiel gave her a formal nod of apology and she canted her head with that calm and austere poise.

“It is alright. It has been a while since we’ve seen one another. This is my son, Nashriel.” She pushed her fair hair over her shoulders, all long locks spilling about.

“He does favor Leramin, doesn’t he?” Malkiel glanced from the child to Zirriel, both with equally pale locks. Her mate had that pallor as well, all pale and golden silky hair. He was a truly refined image of an angel, devoid of emotion.

“Child, go play over where I can see you for a minute. Malkiel and I need to speak.” Zirriel patted the child on his wispy head and he ran off to investigate the flowers along the side of the house.

Malkiel watched patiently until she turned back, staring him down.

“I’m in a bit of a pickle at the moment, Zirriel.” Malkiel frowned and found her eyes twinkling with amusement that

didn't meet her face, or even her lips, with the little smile he knew she could get.

"Is it about the boy?" She canted her head to the side, waiting for him to react. But Malkiel had that much control, at least.

"It does appear so. I am curious how you became involved in all this." Malkiel rocked on his feet, an inherently nervous gesture that he found himself doing on occasion.

She shrugged noncommittally and walked, keeping an eye out on Nashriel as she did so. "I was accosted several years ago by a demon who was in a bit of a situation, needing a woman healed. She had done damage to herself, drugs. He'd commissioned her child. He thought my prior union with you would have begotten hostility or resentment and tried to offer a deal."

"What did you do?" A sudden cold sensation flooded over Malkiel's skin. Zirriel mucking about in demon affairs with her powers of clairvoyance not unlike a demon's oracle.

"Malkiel. You and I shared a fondness for one another once, just because that has changed, does not mean I wish for you to suffer alone." She turned and took his hand, cupping it in a tender gesture, but she was still so cold in her heart. She had good intentions, he could tell.

"What did you do, Zirriel?" Malkiel swallowed hard.

"He completely messed up the procedure. He thought her adjacency to demon kind would fare her well. Kalamax did the deal wrong, and all he managed to do was give a woman with a drug problem a child that had more power than a human

body could contain, he didn't even complete the ritual right. And he'd petitioned to only pay the woman her full price *after* the child made it to him safely. I assume you know what happened to him, and needless to say, that woman wasn't getting her money." Zirriel waved her hand indifferently. "I am not cruel. I agreed to help the woman and child, and I was going to leave the magic alone, but the price we agreed upon, he attempted to swindle me out of."

Malkiel buried his face in his palm and sighed. "I think regency gets more stupid every year, especially the ones that are becoming irrelevant."

"Malkiel, do you recall my epithet for you? When in the throes of passion, I cried for you?" Her tone dropped out of earshot of her child and eyes cast to the side. Malkiel drew a blank.

"It's been so long. I recall other things."

Zirriel sighed heavily and leaned toward him, whispering into his ear. "You were always so insecure and driven by matters of the heart, my behemoth, my bed's terror."

"Feather of a behemoth..." Malkiel's brow furrowed. "My feather?" He turned his head to catch Zirriel's flat gaze.

"What else? Horn of behemoth and feather. I never lied. I knew Kalamax would never come. Lucifer might tell you more about how the process works. What little I know is of no matter, I'm certain. I never was interested in sides or war."

"Is that you saying you won't leak secrets?"

"Haven't before. Won't now. I really do have regrets about how our relationship went. I regret that I wasn't able to

love you like you needed. I'm sorry you had nobody to join with you in rush." She reached up to tuck his hair back absentmindedly. "I admire you. And I met a demon and his mate—Falcalor, I believe? I had a lot of ill thoughts of Lucifer until I saw his son and mate. They had the love that you always wanted. It was beautiful."

"Gem and Fal are pretty sweet together." Malkiel couldn't bring himself to say more, his mind reeling.

"And that's what I felt like you deserved, that love. Even when I didn't give it to you, you gave to me, and that was special. You gave with all your heart. Is he everything you wanted?" Zirriel met his eyes, a flash of worry in them, an expression that did twist her eternally youthful face, lips tilting ever so slightly in a frown.

Malkiel reached and took her hand, giving it an affectionate squeeze. "No. But I think I'm everything he's ever wanted, and I think that's enough."

"You deserve to be happy, Malkiel. You deserve a family, not that you've not joined one already, from what I've heard." A flicker of amusement touched her voice.

"Who, Vize?" Malkiel hadn't really thought of himself as a fixture in the family.

"I always had a feeling he'd be a bearer. Too much bravado. Too artificially dominant." She chuckled. "I'd love to meet his daughter."

Malkiel thumbed through his phone and held it up to her, a photo of Cora on the screen asleep sprawled across Malkiel's

chest, her wavy dark hair, inky as Vize's ever was, tossed about her shoulders.

“Oh, she's so *normal* looking.” Zirriel stared openly.

“Normal isn't the word I'd use, but she's as angelic as they come.” Malkiel chuckled. *Unless Kir is involved.*

“I meant no offense, but do take my number and tell Vize to call me sometime, yes? Is he doing better?”

“Better than he was before the whole prison ordeal, believe it or not. He smiles all the time and laughs so hard he cries. I don't even think he realizes he's doing it.” Malkiel found the corner of his mouth tugging up at the thought of how happy Vize had been since Cora was born. He fretted over the little girl and loved his mate so powerfully.

Zirriel nodded sagely. “I never thought Vize would be able to break, but he did. And, Malkiel?” She extended an arm to draw him into an awkward and light hug, an unfamiliar gesture, even if they'd once been intimate.

“Hmm?” Malkiel patted her upper back, nodding.

“You're breaking, too. Perhaps Lucifer wasn't wrong after all. Only different, like you.” She offered him a forced smile that meant the world to him. “Now, take my number, and don't be a stranger. There are so few children for Nashriel to play with, that I figure he may benefit from some company, even if it means fraternizing with the enemy.” She separated from him and held out her phone.

Malkiel glanced over her number and plotted it into his phone before nodding gratefully. “Thank you.”

“Hmm? Oh. Don’t mention it. Please. If I can see the look on Falcalor’s face on yours...I think I’ll forgive myself for what I let you suffer through.” She regarded him for a lingering moment before parting and reaching for her child. “Would you like to say bye-bye to Malkiel, Nashriel?”

The child glanced up at Malkiel and gave him a shy flap of his hand that seemed to please Zirriel. Used to children, he gave the child a friendly nod and a wave before turning and shimmering away.

His mind focused on Jericho and the prospect of claiming him, but wandered over to his own houses, the places he’d kept and owned in all these years, some place quiet he could take him, but also his mind fell to Luce and the words that needed to be exchanged. Because he didn’t need to be caught off guard fraternizing with the enemy without prior clearance. Talking to her once was one thing, even at Lucifer’s behest, but casually? He showed up in his Nebraska home, a rather quaint and small thing in the mountains. The air lingered stale and untended, but the place was clean and well cared for. He thumbed through his phone to the cleaning service he used and called, walking about as he asked for a team to come get the place scoured and ready for an extended stay.

Malkiel opened the curtains and stared out at the scenery, all green leading into barren cliff sides. Up this far, they had special vehicles to bring things in, access roads and the like. It was far from convenient but not a problem for someone who could go anywhere they wanted at a thought. He texted Lucifer.

Talked to everyone I needed to. When would you like to discuss?

Almost immediately, a message fired back. *Where are you?*

Nebraska mountains, the little place.

Lucifer didn't bother knocking, rather showed up in his living room unannounced. The two had lost that formality so long ago. "You met Zirriel?"

Malkiel nodded. "Kalamax tried to stiff her on payment, so she took advantage. Apparently, the boy is a gift for me. Go figure?"

"That means she knows..." Lucifer bared his teeth and Malkiel waved him off.

"I think she's close to falling herself, for different reasons, brother. She's held her tongue, and she's got a child now that has a spark of something in them, vibrance?" Malkiel pondered over Nashriel's countenance. The boy would have life and soul in him once he grew older. His heart was full.

"That's good... Good." Lucifer paced.

"I got her number. I think she'd be amicable to settling things and assuaging you." Malkiel petered about, not knowing what to do.

"And the boy?"

"Do I claim him with silver, or do I give his wings my light? Does he even have wings yet..." Malkiel rubbed at the side of his face as Lucifer flopped onto his couch lazily, his casual clothes askew.

“He’s attuning to you now. If you want him to shift forms early, I’d suggest getting him into your bed, yes? I bet he’s so close to a rush that it’s near unbearable for him.” Lucifer rubbed the stubble of his chin as his other hand absentmindedly rubbed a small circle on his stomach. Self-consciousness at its finest.

“I suppose we better head out. I have some people to talk to. Perhaps I should speak to his aunt first.” Malkiel sighed.

“Please let me sit here for thirty minutes or so. Everyone back home is fawning over me, and it’s tiresome. His aunt is in good spirits today though. We’ve been working with her to put her in charge of a new school. Her job, back five years ago, was pretty much strictly helping her kind integrate, and for some reason that was done away with. So much has failed.” Lucifer laid his head back and groaned.

“You took on too much all by yourself. You’re learning how to delegate and take criticism.”

“I blame the secretary!”

“Good. It’ll rub off on Xander. I’m terrified that child will gain a bad disposition one day.” Malkiel folded his arms.

“That’s why she’s so important. And besides. Between Robin and Malacoda, Xander has zero chance of being a malcontent child. He’s an excellent communicator, asks for what he wants and accepts reason. Even as a babe, he never threw tantrums.” Lucifer sighed and closed his eyes.

“Well, cleaning crew will be here in an hour. I’m handling my business. Stay as long as you need and call if you need anything.” Malkiel waved Lucifer off, smirking at the

vulnerability Luce was showing, after all these years, breaking as easily as a fledgling. Malkiel hesitated. “Hey, Luce?” He stared at his disheveled brother for a lingering moment.

“Hm?” Lucifer grunted in acknowledgement.

“You’re a damned mess right now, but you were always Father’s favorite.” Malkiel snickered and shimmered, watching Lucifer go wide-eyed until he ended up on Simon’s doorstep. He shot a text off to his apprentice.

Got a minute?

Simon keyed back a few seconds later. *I see you on the door cam. Come on in.*

Malkiel didn’t have to knock anymore. He was on that level of acquaintance with the group, but he still felt it polite.

“What’s brought you here, Malkiel?” Simon stared down at him with concern.

“Need to talk to Cassandra for a moment.”

“Cass? You may have to fight Peter for her. He’s getting a little attached.” Simon gave Malkiel a pitiable smile that he returned, making Simon blink in surprise. “I think we called it right. Jericho’s your one, isn’t he?”

“Luce has more details and I dunno what you’re privileged to, but yeah. Jericho and I will work fine.” Malkiel followed Simon’s lead to the media room where Peter sat next to Cassandra, watching some animated film while she petted over his head.

Malkiel cleared his throat and caught a few sets of eyes on him: Rachael, Elliot, Moon, and Peter. Cass smiled over, as if

everything were fine.

“Cassandra, may I have a word with you?” Peter’s curious gaze turned sour. A fleeting something in his eyes told Malkiel all he’d needed to know about a little boy still wanting his mother. “I won’t be long at all. I promise, Peter.” That seemed to relieve him as Cassandra gave him a head pat and tottered out into the hall. Simon stepped in and grabbed Peter off the floor in her stead and smothered him with affection that he rejected with all the enthusiasm of a normal eleven-year-old boy.

“Peter seems in good spirits. How are you?” Malkiel kept his gaze impassive despite the massive amount of impatience that rustled his heart.

“Peter’s a sweet child who misses his mother, but I’m very well. Thank you for asking.” She hesitated. “Well, aside from worrying about Jericho, but that’s to be expected. Is he well?” Cass blinked up at him politely.

“From what I can tell. He’s healing nicely, and Lucifer is pleased with his work. Everyone seems to like him and he fits in with regency like he was made for it.” Malkiel chose his words carefully.

“He was.” Cassandra’s flat tone brought Malkiel back.

“Yes. And we’ve found out that Kalamax had done some rather scandalous things aside from creating a mate without registering them or tending them. He screwed over so many people that—” Malkiel cleared his throat. “Needless to say, that Jericho imprinted on me and I would like your blessing in claiming him. And by rights, I’d also owe you financially.”

Cassandra blinked. She'd known Malkiel in passing over the years, seeing him about Firstlight in fleeting glimpses. But they didn't know one another. "You need someone to take care of you?" A knowing smile twisted her full lips and Malkiel nodded.

"And you like him?"

Malkiel nodded once more. "Very much so. He's so very sweet and his temperament and patience are unmatched. And he's so good with the children."

Cassandra beamed. "He is, isn't he? He's a pied piper when it comes to babies though. But I didn't say anything. He is so calm that they go right to sleep in his arms."

"I'm a bit of a mess though."

Malkiel had to fight the soft smile and chuckle that took him by surprise and flinched when Cassandra leaned up with a very familiar gesture, patting his cheek like Jericho did. She'd raised him well. "Good. He needs someone to take care of. I approve. You're no Kalamax, but I'm thankful for that. Something tells me that you'll love him the way he is. He complements you."

Malkiel sighed in relief, but his chest felt tight still, like he had still more to exhale. It was like Vize had said, like he'd been holding a breath for far too long. "Thank you. I'll be taking him for a few days. Don't know what to expect, but I'll bring him back whole."

Cassandra patted his shoulder and nodded. "Now get on. I spoke to him on the phone earlier and he sounded fit to burst with nerves." She shooed him away and Malkiel shimmered,

fully intent on folding Jericho into his wings until the wee hours of the morning to come.

Chapter Ten

Jericho

Malkiel didn't make it down to breakfast that morning, and his sudden disappearance confused Jericho, though Vize assured him and a rather fussy Cora that Malkiel had some very important things coming up.

That was how it started, at least. Something like pleasant fire blossomed inside his belly, a strange warmth at first as it radiated outward until the rippling heat climbed to his neck. Cora, for her part, had seized the first opportunity possible to go after Jericho's soft waves with a comb. And it'd been hours of her unending focus. Children were supposed to lose patience fast! Whoever said that had never met Cora before. Her unskilled touch and the prick of the comb kept him as grounded as anything else though.

"You look fit to burst, Jericho." Vize settled near Cora and gently coaxed the brush from her before undoing his long black braid. Her little eyes glimmered brightly, and she helped Vize uncoil his long silken hair.

"I didn't think Malkiel would leave after this morning, not like that, at any rate." Jericho frowned and furrowed his brow. But Vize, despite Cora's overenthusiastic tugs of the comb, remained ever calm and unresponsive to it.

"I think Malkiel likes you very much, and he's nervous. I bet my favorite feather that he's going to come home and cart you off to claim you."

“C-claim me?” Jericho stiffened as his heart did its best to climb into his throat. A heated flush consumed his cheeks.

“Is that not what you want?” Vize tilted his head and hissed, finally reacting to an overzealous tug on the comb.

“I would. Yes. Malkiel is very kind.”

Cora, who at that point hadn’t appeared to be listening, piped up, “Does that mean you get to be Uncle Jericho?”

Jericho choked, and Vize chuckled. “I believe so.”

“Good. Cuz Uncle Malkiel is always dirty and grumpy.” She nodded sharply.

Jericho stifled a giggle and the trembling sensation of laughter flushed his cheeks more until the giggles moved into full-on laughter.

“Cora, can you go watch TV for a few minutes? I think your soon-to-be-uncle needs a cup of coffee, hm?” Vize reached over for Cora and gave her a squeezing hug before sending her off and drawing Jericho up to stand, still caught in his fit of giggles.

“Come on.” Vize patted Jericho’s back and guided him into the kitchen to sit. “What can I make for you? Cap?”

“That sounds delightful,” Jericho said, taking controlled breaths, but he felt so *much*. Laughter and love coursed through him as much as a strong desire for Malkiel to return and spend uninterrupted time lusting in his bed.

“You tuned into Malkiel real quick, didn’t you?” Vize inserted a pod into the machine and mashed the button a few times, brow furrowing before it hissed to life.

“Yeah. It... I thought... I don't know what I thought. He showed up, and it was right.” Jericho shivered, thinking about Malkiel's magic flowing into him, righting the wrong that Sonnoth left behind.

“That's what we were all wondering. He needs someone, and you felt like the other half of him. Like you said, I felt like Tohu's other half.”

“Is it bad that I want him so soon?”

“No. Why would it be? Look at me, mated to Tohu so quickly, a demon, a cambion that hadn't earned immortality, taking it through me. And he's *right*. Even if I am the bearer... I celebrate him so much.” Vize sighed so sweetly. “But don't be like us. We fought and hid our love. It caused problems that communication would have fixed. If he wants to take you, and you want to take him, go for it. Everyone approves. I assume that's why they brought you to him in the first place.” Vize jumped a little nervously as the machine spluttered and bubbled out a fine spray of coffee and foam into the cup.

“You were the one that Lucifer kept locked up, weren't you?” Jericho couldn't overlook the averted gazes and the nervousness.

“Yes. I've had some time to deal with it. Certainly my jailers weren't kind to me, and Lucifer was strung too thin and angry with me... There're no excuses, but he freed me from so much. My brothers before I fell kept me at war with demon kind, kept me filled with hate.” Vize swallowed hard and shrugged, fighting off a wave of emotion. “I was never angel enough. I was never right for anyone, and I was so alone.

Honestly, I was hoping Lucifer would end me when I got caught.” Vize chuckled, scratching at his arm.

Jericho rose and approached Vize cautiously, taking the coffee from the machine and swapping it to one of Vize’s sweet confections, some sugared-donut latte creation that he kept sprinkles on the counter for.

“Come on, sit down. You wanted to talk.” Jericho brought Vize in and, merely sitting in the angel’s nervous energy, made him want to cry.

“S-sorry, I don’t like—” Vize’s eyes teared up, and he choked on his words. Jericho picked up a clean dishcloth and wetted a corner before handing it to him.

“Do all demons know about the cry towel?” Vize huffed a laugh through the tears.

“I don’t know about demons, but I’m guessing angels don’t?” Jericho raised a brow carefully, and Vize buried his face into the cloth.

“You feel so much, don’t you, my friend? Was that before or after you fell?” Jericho pulled his chair up closer and grabbed Vize’s cup, remembering him adding far too many sprinkles. Quickly, Jericho shook the shaker and brought Vize the coffee and sat down, his own eyes leaking a little in sympathy.

“Worse! Because I couldn’t cry. It was stuck in me, burning. No laughter, no tears, like I was paralyzed and trapped.” Vize shuddered but eyed the coffee gratefully. “You’re a real dear, you know that?”

“Eh. I enjoy caring for people. Like I think you enjoy being cared for. And that’s okay.” Jericho patted Vize’s knee and smiled.

“And now I’ve got you crying, too!” He wiped at his face again before sniffing. “With you so close to a rush or a heat right now, it’s got to be frustrating.” Vize laughed.

“Huh?” Jericho pulled back, the stinging in his eyes ebbing.

“You’ve attuned to Malkiel somehow and your body wants him to—you know?” Vize bit his lower lip and huffed a laugh through the tears.

“What?” Jericho blinked in surprise.

“Your emotions are really high right now. You’re crying because I’m crying. You were stuck in a giggle fit. That’s all things that tell me I’m about to have a rush. When I can’t hold back.” Vize grinned.

“That why you’re emotional?” Jericho shrugged.

“No. I’m a complete mess. Honestly, I think I feel on a normal day what an angel feels during their rush, and my rushes are far too intense to handle, emotion-wise. Tohu handles the other part well.” Vize waved his hand dismissively, and Jericho found his mind wondering to how sex with the small Tohu and the stately Vize worked because Vize carried the energy and countenance of a top but submitted far too easily, like a bearer’s stereotype. “Thank goodness he’s a berserker. He makes me feel so tiny and loved and protected.” Vize beamed.

Ohhhhhh... That explains it.

Vize sighed and Jericho leaned in to give him a hug, patting his back. “Tell me more about this...rush thing. You say I’m going into heat?”

“Heat... Rush... I’m not certain. I don’t know if mating an angel will give you a rush instead of a heat like that. Malkiel will certainly have one. I wonder how he’s handling it.” Vize relaxed from Jericho’s gentle pats and sighed softly.

“I don’t feel particularly in *heat*.”

“Hmm... Rushes are like...you lose control of your emotions. They spike during the day and you’re a little too open, but once the sun sets, you’re a slave to it. You need your mate to comfort and love you in all the ways he knows how, not only sex. It’s emotional fulfillment, too.”

Footsteps pricked his ears and Vize glanced toward the door, drawing Jericho’s eye. Malkiel stood there, cheeks flushed, concern in his eyes. “Vize? You okay?” Malkiel glanced at Jericho, too, hesitant as he approached them.

“Oh, I’m fine. Jericho was getting the talk from me, and I got silly. Really, I’m fine. Thank you.” Vize dabbed at his eyes and Jericho pulled away, letting Malkiel take over, holding his friend for a long few seconds. Maybe there was a pang of jealousy or a flash of want in Jericho’s heart, but the two understood one another in a way Jericho would have an eternity to learn.

“I’m sorry, Malkiel. I’m emotional. I’m completely fine.” Vize sniffled and Malkiel pulled away, checking him over.

“That’s fine. Want me to get Tohu or Ducky?” Malkiel canted his head and Vize shook his head.

“Cora’s watching TV and Tohu is off doing something for Luce again.” Vize cleared his throat and waved Malkiel away.

“You sure you don’t want Tohu?” Malkiel raised a brow and Vize refused. “Alright. You’re at the tail end of a rush, so I guess you’re still a little sniffly, huh?”

Vize chuckled. “No. Jericho here has been giggling and glowing on and off all day.”

Malkiel guiltily peered over at Jericho and gave him a terse smile. “I had planned to come sweep you away, but it appears that my home will take another few hours to be ready and aired out. Would it be alright if we stayed with Vize and Cora a little while, at least until Tohu comes home?”

“You two can head out. It’s fine. I promise.” Vize waved them off, but Malkiel shook his head and Jericho agreed.

“Nah. We stay with you and Ducky and when Tohu gets home, we’ll give you two a bit to snuggle then we’ll be out for a few days. That alright with you, Jericho?” Malkiel glanced over and he found himself nodding, despite his fears.

“Gotta make some phone calls...” Jericho muttered softly, but Malkiel shook his head.

“You’re fine with Luce, your aunt knows and approves and everyone else is told.” Malkiel gave Jericho a sweet smile. “I admire your patience.”

“More patient than me, at any rate.” Vize snorted. “I had Tohu worshiping me in a few hours and in bed with me in a day.” He puffed up with pride and Malkiel flicked his head, annoyed.

“You threw yourself at the boy because he was your type. The mating was an accidental afterthought.”

“Look who’s talking, Mister ‘Sleeping in my bed is my price!’” Vize snorted and the tears went away.

“Hey! He’s cute! Look at him!” Malkiel gestured toward Jericho, who tucked down into his chair.

“Yes, but not as cute as Tohu.” Vize rolled his eyes. “And don’t argue because you do *not* want me to say I’d jump Jericho’s bones on the right day.”

Jericho’s eyes went wide, and he pursed his lips.

“Well, if you’d cheer the fuck up, I would be jumping his bones and that wouldn’t be a worry now, would it?” Malkiel sighed with exasperation.

“Hell on Earth, Malkiel! You can leave if need be, for fuck’s sake. Don’t let me hold you back.” Vize waved them off, but Malkiel wouldn’t be gainsaid.

“If you weren’t such a stubborn bint, I’d gladly take Jericho out to claim him, but you insist on trying to do things that upset you!” Malkiel growled and Vize shoved him, snorting as a half grin drew across his face.

Malkiel shoved back and a shimmer of a glow flashed across his skin, reciprocated by Vize.

In a flash, the two were running, Vize bolting toward the back door with Malkiel in tow, shouting at one another as they tore their shirts off and made it past the deck, Jericho following cautiously.

Cora, alerted by all the noise, tottered up and blinked out at them as their wings whipped out in full view and a wrestling match on a level Jericho had never seen before took place. Malkiel's firm form was softer than Vize's but stockier, denser than Vize's strength. The wings, though, those took Jericho's breath away. Vize's near-black gray wings, outdone only by his sleek hair, flitted with irritation as he flipped Malkiel onto his back, digging his bright-red wings, like a cardinal's in fall, darkening at the bases and hackles, into the ground.

"Who's a bint, now, you ass!" Vize grappled Malkiel's arms and yelped. With a twist of his hips, Malkiel drew a leg up and kicked Vize in the chest, sending him tumbling.

"You!" Malkiel staggered to his feet and rubbed at his lip before pouncing Vize face-first into the grass.

Cora tugged on Jericho's sleeve and glanced up, her face filled not with *concern*, precisely, but curiosity. "Can I sit on your shoulders? I wanna watch."

Jericho wasn't quite sure if this was something a child prone to engaging in modern warfare tactics with foam darts should be watching, but he obliged and knelt to let her crawl up and sit over his shoulders, holding onto his head for balance.

"Don't try to walk inside with me up here. Pappa hit my head on the door last time." Cora grasped harder, and Jericho couldn't help laughing at the thought.

"Why are they fighting?" Cora patted Jericho's head, and he glanced up.

“I think your uncle Malkiel is feeling playful. Like you girls the other day.” Jericho snorted with laughter and pursed his lips when Vize grabbed a handful of grass and stuffed it into Malkiel’s face, making him spit and struggle, bucking him off again. Wings flapped and beat against one another, hands smashing into faces playfully, laughter piping up.

“What on earth?” A deep but strangely familiar voice piped up as a large shadow loomed over Jericho’s shoulder.

“Big Pappa!” Cora squealed and Vize glanced up, distracted as Tohu, in his greater form, plucked Cora off Jericho’s shoulders.

“Hello, Duckling,” Tohu laughed and snorted as Vize and Malkiel separated, scuffed and dirty. Vize spit grass for a minute before focusing intently on Tohu, his eyes full of adoration.

“What has you all fun-sized, dear?” Vize tucked himself into the arm not occupied by Cora, and Jericho found it so sweet, and knew at that moment exactly why Vize was fit to be a bearer for the petite Tohu.

“Lucifer had me working something with half-breeds and you know how I get when I see mates being torn apart.” Tohu leaned down to nuzzle the top of Vize’s head.

“So, what was going on here?” Tohu’s tail gestured between Vize and Malkiel before wrapping deftly around Vize’s legs.

“Malkiel’s feeling a bit playful. He was going to head out, but I got a little weepy, so he wanted to make sure I was okay before they left.” Vize hummed into Tohu’s grip.

“And I said we’d give you two a little time before leaving.” Malkiel stretched himself out, flitting his great red wings. They were beautiful things that Jericho wanted to touch, to bury his fingers into the hackles of, to—he’d not noticed it before, but Jericho glanced down just as his arm’s skin lit up with a soft glow, and like a chain reaction, so did Malkiel and Vize.

“You have no idea how much I appreciate you, Malkiel... and you, too, Jericho.” Tohu gave them a soft nod before passing a pouting Cora off to Malkiel.

“Come on, Ducky. I’ll let you fix my hair up pretty before I go take Jericho out on a nice date. Hmm?” Malkiel bounced Cora on his hip and she lit up.

Oh, to be young and so easily distracted.

Jericho’s simmering warmth that had nestled in his belly all day turned into a strangely deep type of ache that twitched and more than once made him flinch, with something on the verge of being pain.

As they settled into the living room, Cora running off to grab her hair tools, Tohu carried Vize off to go clean up. Tohu smelled like a fight and Vize held a scent of arousal so strong it was nearly heat-like. He must have *really* liked Tohu’s superior form, his black scaled wings rustling as he walked. Once upon a time that might have given Jericho a second glance, but he was far more interested in a certain stockier angel, one with stubborn messy brown hair and silvery eyes that made his heart ache.

Cora, for her part, busied herself picking bits of leaves and grass from Malkiel’s hair, rather focused on her task at

hand.

“Da says I can’t cut hair yet, but it’s okay. When you take Uncle Malkiel home, you need to give him a bath. Him and Da got all dirty.” Cora picked at a tiny leaf stuck in Malkiel’s hair before moving on, being rather gentle and meticulous, unlike her normal zeal.

“I think—I think that can be arranged.” Jericho turned his gaze to Malkiel’s, watching those silvery depths darken with desire.

“Uncle Jericho? You’ll be back, right?” Cora paused her work to stare at Jericho, who blinked at her in surprise.

“Uncle?” Malkiel chuckled.

“Mhm. You two was kissin’ so you gave him uncle cooties or something... It’s con-tay-jis.” Cora furrowed her brow in thought and shrugged. “Contay- juice...”

“Contagious?” Malkiel’s delightful laugh didn’t cease, but Cora nodded in agreement.

“Cora! Come on, Duckling. Uncle Malkiel has a date to take Jericho on. Let’s go comb Da’s hair for him, hmm? I need my braiding assistant.” Tohu chuckled from halfway down the stairs and Cora nodded before standing, gathering her things, and giving each of the two a hug before running back up the stairs to go with Tohu, his auburn hair a mane of wet strands curling at the ends.

“Malkiel?” Jericho couldn’t say another word as Malkiel dove and claimed his mouth, lips sealing over anything he could say.

“I wanted to wait, but I can’t. There’s so much to tell you.” Malkiel claimed his mouth again and drew Jericho away in a shimmer of the most pleasant light and magic that made his hips jerk.

“I know it’ll change me. I’m okay with it. Stop the ache.” Jericho gasped and found his back being pushed into a couch, freshly scented of some sort of room freshener. Everything around them scented of being *too clean*. It didn’t smell enough of Malkiel, impersonal almost.

“Where are we?” Jericho swallowed and took Malkiel’s mouth again, groaning as hands wandered and fingers played over his side and back, down to his hip.

“One of my vacation homes. Where I go when I need quiet.” Malkiel drew back and used the moment to strip Jericho’s shirt, pushing it up and fighting it over his head to stare down at him. Hunger glittered in those silver eyes.

“We’re alone?” Jericho panted, pleasure coursing through him as Malkiel attacked his neck with kisses and nibbles, licking his way down to worship Jericho’s tender buds. Each nipple drew intense pleasure from him, drawing up into a sharp and indomitable point.

“Yes.” Malkiel’s response came in less than a whisper than a growl that made Jericho shiver with want. That spreading warmth in his belly grew hotter, spread further, and Jericho felt so much, everything too intense.

“Malkiel...” Jericho reached into his pocket and pulled out the horn tips, his hand shaking as he offered them to him. Malkiel paused, ending his assault of lust and stared at the two bits of silver.

“Burn them for me.” Jericho rolled his hips to grind against Malkiel, increasing their contact with a shudder and whimper.

Malkiel didn't hesitate, sweeping the tips up as holy fire crossed his fingers, a flare of light that left two charred silver fittings in his palm that clattered to the coffee table in an instant.

Jericho clenched his eyes shut, bit his lower lip, and tensed in wait for the sensation that Simon promised him.

But nothing came.

Jericho opened one eye and stared up at Malkiel in confusion, whimpering with a question left unasked.

“Behemoth's horn and feather. It wasn't a behemoth's feather, Jericho. It was mine. You were made for me.” Malkiel pulled Jericho up to sit in his lap as they shifted and pawed at his sides and back, staring up at Jericho with unending affection.

“How?” Jericho shuddered and tensed as Malkiel's fingers dug into his back, magic pulsing through them.

“Kalamax made you wrong, and your mother got sick—”

“Meth or heroin?” Jericho sighed heavily.

“Zirriel didn't specify.” Malkiel snaked his hands up Jericho's back, right where his shoulder blades were, and moved back down, searching for something to grasp onto.

“Zirriel... Your mate?” Jericho tensed, expecting to feel jealousy or anger, rejection, anything. But Jericho's thoughts sang with contentment.

“She used my feather to make you for me. You were mine from the beginning. I’m so sorry I didn’t take you sooner. Had I only known.” Malkiel pulled his face in, touching their noses, lips brushing as a sheen of sweat shimmered in his glow.

“Why?” Jericho’s heart swelled with pride.

“Because she wanted me to have someone capable of all the love I needed. And...and I didn’t want to change you. The moment I felt your magic, it started calling to me and I needed to feel you. Please don’t change for me.” Malkiel’s eyes glimmered as wetness pooled at his lids’ edges, waiting for the damning blink that would let them flow.

“And we’re having a rush?” Jericho basked in the warmth and glow of them, staring down at his intended with his purpose restored. Malkiel nodded, his lips contorted into a grin of absolute pleasure that Jericho returned. He beamed down at Malkiel, giving the gift of a smile back, hoping in his heart of hearts that he could give the angel that love that he wanted.

“It appears so.” Malkiel chuckled and sat up, moving with Jericho to waltz him into the dimness of the ending day, the sunset throwing brilliant colors across the mountainside. “But give me your wings, Jericho. I need to see them.”

“How?” Jericho sagged in Malkiel’s grasp and gasped as Malkiel fanned his wings for him. Every bit of flesh Jericho could see glowed intensely, so much love and want blossoming in his endless light.

“You have to want it enough. Mine come when I hold my breath for a second and imagine falling from great heights. You have magic. You’re years late. It’s in there and I’m sorry

you had to wait.” Malkiel tipped Jericho’s chin upward and kissed him with tender and sweet sweeps of tongue that had power from the mounting glow rising between them.

“I am angel?” Jericho trembled. “Born fallen?”

“I don’t know. But it won’t matter. You’re perfect.”

Jericho pushed onto his tiptoes to suck Malkiel’s tongue and dissolve into senseless pleasure at his kisses while the heat in his belly spread and Jericho pondered those words, the swilling field of Malkiel’s magic, and the bright glow that shone even through his closed lids. “Malkiel...”

Stranger things had happened, Jericho was certain. The slick and foreign sensation twinging his backside told him he was indeed the bearer he was meant to be. But not only that, the fire in his back hurt in a way that was equal parts pleasure and pain, like some deep chasm staring into the void of his power opened, and like a flower, the tight bud twisted within him and blossomed, every petal a feather, spreading wide behind him. The sudden rush went through him like exhaling the world’s largest breath, leaving part of him empty inside as he sank, trembling.

“Father’s graces...” Malkiel choked and Jericho attempted to move his new appendages, but they were strangely *more* and not as intuitive as he’d imagined.

Chapter Eleven

Malkiel

Against the sunset it was hard to tell, watching Jericho's body push forth his wings. Of all the colors that Malkiel could have imagined, the brilliant orange and blues of the sunset, deep purple in the black, made him weep with joy. They were gorgeous, full, enormous things that when he spread them...

"Jericho..." Malkiel wept and kissed over the boy's mouth as he sank with weakness. Where Malkiel had originally thought two wings rested upon his back, he noticed the folds of the wings laying atop one another like layers, and what appeared to be one wing spread into three, all the muscles shivering.

Seraphim.

He'd never met one before, but they had to exist, didn't they? They were myth and mystery that Malkiel couldn't handle. "Jericho... You're so fucking beautiful." The tears swam in Malkiel's eyes, pouring over his cheeks, abating his oncoming rush as their glows settled between them to a dull and weak flicker.

"What are they like?" Jericho shuddered and Malkiel kissed him quiet.

"They're the most gorgeous things I've ever seen. Look." Malkiel drew his wings around them and the layers stayed put as one. Two beautiful wings shifted and rustled, spreading into three fused together that fanned in a peacock-like array.

“What is—What kind of?” Jericho stared at the feathers with awe.

“I dunno. I want to make a quick phone call before we—”

“No. Absolutely not. We fuck now. You can make calls later.” Jericho wouldn’t hear of anything different and pushed Malkiel back, his wings resituating, unfamiliar appendages stretching, shivering, almost presenting for him. Malkiel’s eyes watered beyond his own tears.

“Do you really want to be out here in the open like this, or do you want to go inside?” Malkiel spanned his hands down Jericho’s slender waist, circling his clothed hips.

“The less I have to wait for you, the better I will feel.” His breathy whimper made Malkiel curl up with a near sob of want. His cock pushed against the fabric of his pants, straining to be free.

Malkiel feared putting him on his back so soon, but he needed Jericho bare to make it work. Supporting his back with one hand, Malkiel drew Jericho to lie back where his pants slipped away easily under awkward fingers. Malkiel remembered zippers being a rarity so many years ago when he’d last had someone. And certainly women in his heyday were easier, needing only to hike a few skirts, but Jericho’s clothes slid free like a second skin, his soft body trembling beneath, heated and flush.

“Want. Please.” Jericho squirmed and Malkiel rolled Jericho over on his hands and knees so he could see the beautiful sunset of his wings flicking reflexively.

“Is it okay this way first? If you’ve never had sex before, it’ll be easier.” Malkiel’s words came breathy and restrained as he fought every urge to fuck into the boy mercilessly.

“Please. Please, Malkiel,” Jericho sobbed as he dipped his back, exposing his pink hole, glistening in the waning sunlight, pliant and wanton only for Malkiel.

“Shh. I don’t want to hurt you.” Malkiel swept a finger along Jericho’s perineum, savoring the smooth firmness of the root of his cock before circling his hole and pressing in, working along the boy’s spot to bring him relief.

Jericho squirmed and hissed with the intrusion and it occurred to Malkiel to ask.

“Do you even masturbate this way?” Malkiel’s cock throbbed with want, his entire length a pillar of aching need that he desperately wanted to bury.

“Nf, no! Never wanted to... Occasionally the o-other way.” Jericho choked as Malkiel circled his finger inside and gave a second, working Jericho with tender motions, drawing his other hand around to stroke his drooling cock, gathering precum to rub back into his sliding skin. “Oh fuck, please!” Jericho’s body shook with desperate sobs and Malkiel gave him a third finger before scissoring him open.

Jericho crooned with desperation and Malkiel slipped his fingers away, drawing his slick hand over his aching cock. “Jericho.” He groaned his soon-to-be-mate’s name and stroked his cock with the spilled wetness, slicking himself up for his first plunge all while his other hand still stroked.

“Malkiel... Please. I can’t take it.” Jericho sobbed and choked the moment Malkiel’s cock kissed against his wet hole, pressing gently and withdrawing to ease the breach of girth. Jericho hissed and pushed back, tensing, teeth gritting, a demanding growl of frustration caught in his throat that made Malkiel sink deeper into him.

Every muscle in Jericho’s body shook and trembled, squeezing tight around the invading length. And with only that one little motion, the concept of virginity? Gone. But Malkiel couldn’t let that alone be his experience. He rolled his hips, searching to strike the bundle of nerves deep in Jericho’s channel. And he knew he hit it when Jericho keened and his cock dribbled a few generous dollops of precum. “I’m going to fuck you slowly at first, and when you need to come, do it. It’ll let you hold up longer for the next one.”

Jericho sobbed with urgency and jerked his hips, from his awkward motions torn between wanting Malkiel’s hand and cock, spearing and stroking him into a glorious finish that ended with him releasing in hard streaks over the moss-covered earth outside. Malkiel groaned and released Jericho’s cock, situated his hips and grasped onto the smaller male’s hackles, his hands aglow with angelic magic that he forced into him, healing all of Sonnoth’s damage, not amputating or slowly rewebbing but patching it completely with his own, claiming them in a way that would entwine them for eternity.

Malkiel jerked and groaned as a foreign sensation came over him, his cock aching, growing fuller, harder, the base flaring into a knot... Angel males didn’t have knots, but whatever had caused the phenomenon made Malkiel keen

sharply and shoot deep into Jericho's channel, soaking his insides to tame the fire within.

Jericho screamed as his insides squeezed, entire body jolting and jerking as a second, more powerful orgasm took him by storm, peppering the earth with his glistening spend.

"And now you're mine, boy. All mine. Mine forever." Malkiel groaned as he worked the knot, teasing himself into a weaker release, pulsing lightly. Fortunately, not the lewd waste of spend that demons made. Angels filled one another with magic, not cum.

"I don't think I've... Malkiel..." Jericho collapsed under Malkiel's weight and trembled, the sudden loosening of his muscles letting Malkiel slip free to dribble over his soft cheeks.

"Shh, come." Malkiel drew Jericho up and cradled him before standing.

"I did. Twice." Jericho hummed appreciatively and stretched in Malkiel's arms, catlike and graceful.

"I know. I felt it. You feel so very nice." Malkiel strolled into his house and made a beeline straight for the bathroom, turning the shower on to full blast, the rich mineral-laden spring water filtering in with a slightly sulfurous undertone that reminded Malkiel of the pit in a secure and comforting sort of way.

The heat surrounded them, the water beading and coursing over their bodies as Malkiel pushed into him again, taking Jericho for a second and third time as the moss and dirt

left their skin. Jericho dissolved into wanton drunken lust, so much so that Malkiel couldn't part from him.

Zirriel, once, had been very affectionate during her rushes. She snuggled and keened for his cock as much as he wanted to hear her voice and feel her skin. Even when his mark on her faded, a sign their magics were drifting apart, he struggled to find a reason to pull away from her, if only for those glimpses of love, true and pure.

He took Jericho again in his bed and the living room, in the shower once more when the mess grew so sticky between them it made sex uncomfortable. And when Jericho's need ebbed, Malkiel expected to be exhausted and done with it, as he'd been with Zirriel so often, but even so, he burned, taking the boy once more, to feel him writhe beneath. Jericho was perfect.

As dawn rose, Jericho stirred and kissed his way up Malkiel's chest and stared at him with such wondrous eyes, that same blue and copper, still. "I love those eyes. So beautiful. I hear Malacoda gush about Robin's eyes often, but not until I was staring at you in the middle of release did I know how truly amazing watching your eyes could be."

"And yours, too, Malkiel. Look at me. Such a pretty silver, so deep, like a stormy sky." Even breathless, Jericho's voice filled with strength, not tired from their night of lust but energized as the way two mates should be. "Keep smiling for me, always. That smile is mine. And don't be afraid to show it to others, because I want everyone to know how happy we make one another. Hiding what's in your heart is such a shame when it's so beautiful."

Malkiel kissed him quiet and pulled away, treasuring his soft purr of pleasure.

Jericho slid from the bed and stood to stretch, shaking his wings out to right the feathers, instinctively grooming them until Malkiel stepped around to help, zipping the fronds and smoothing them, but mostly admiring the stark white handprints emblazoned right onto his hackles, a mark that told the world that this male belonged to someone. *Mine*.

“Do you need more?” Malkiel took the opportunity to kiss over Jericho’s shoulder.

“No. I’m fantastic. I’d not say no if you wanted to go again.” He turned to face Malkiel and stole a small kiss. It was hard to get over, watching him move those wings hypnotically.

Seraphim. Malkiel couldn’t get over the thought. He wanted to touch them, to encircle them, be encircled by them, and Jericho seemed to think the same as his wings crowded over Malkiel, caging him in sunset feathers.

“So beautiful.” Malkiel stole another kiss, and another, not wanting to part from the perfect male. And it occurred to him that what Zirriel did was wrong on some level. Certainly, Malkiel should have been asked if he wanted a mate. And a choice was taken from Jericho so long ago, but when a life was in her hands, at her whim and price, she did what she could. If Jericho hadn’t been given to him, he’d be just as empty and wanton, only with no direction. Would it be someone worse? Too many questions circled, but the intent was all that mattered. Even so, many years after rejection, Zirriel regretted not giving Malkiel the love he wanted. The love he needed.

“What’s on your mind?” Jericho reached up and ran his fingers through Malkiel’s hair.

“That I’ve never seen anything like you before, no angel or demon. Angels aren’t supposed to have knots, and now I do. What are you? What am I, now?”

“Who am I? I’m Jericho. I am a mate, created for you, driven by circumstance to be yours. To be perfect for you.” Jericho clenched his wings in, covering Malkiel and crowding them. “But who are you?”

“I am Malkiel Elend. I am of the first, of the never born, of the endless. I am red of wing and my fall was predicted in the breath of my birth. I am a healer, and my love knows no bounds.” Malkiel encircled Jericho in his arms and let the boy sag against him with comfort.

“I like that. Now go make your phone calls. I’m certain I won’t be this content for long.” Jericho grinned and Malkiel didn’t have to be asked twice.

He dialed Lucifer’s number and walked out the back door, sighing. He answered on the first ring.

“Thank the stars. Are you at the Nebraska place and can I come over, please?” Lucifer’s voice trembled, not with fear but nerves.

“Well yeah, I guess—”

Jericho screamed from inside the house and Malkiel stepped in right as the bedroom door slammed and a rather wide-eyed Lucifer stood frozen by his couch.

“S-seraphim?” Luce pointed toward the door.

“That’s why I was calling...” Malkiel blinked.

“Jumping Jesuit on a pogo stick. And put some pants on! Fortunate I didn’t have to bring one of my mates with you, or you’d be getting some serious side eye, brother.” Lucifer flopped onto Malkiel’s couch and sighed miserably.

“Sick?”

“Yes. And crowded. My skin is crawling and nobody wants to leave me alone for five minutes.” Lucifer hissed under his breath.

“Have you thought about maybe letting Abe take over for a bit? Or is he still playing pretend ruler of hell?”

“Abaddon doesn’t have a mate yet... No children...” Lucifer rubbed his chin.

“He’s one of your full-blood sons, right?” Malkiel snatched a throw off the couch and wrapped it around himself. “Excuse me.” He stepped into the bedroom and found a rather red-faced Jericho struggling to get dressed.

“He’s mine and Lilith’s. Yes. She bore him. Confused the hell out of both of us, let me tell you. I was a bearer.” Lucifer snorted and Malkiel stepped into some pants and drew his wings back in before hunting for a sweater. He didn’t get cold very easily, but it did feel nice to be wrapped.

“Bring him up and let him take over some of the duties while Mal and Fal do the backbreaking work.” Malkiel shrugged. “Rachael will keep him in line.”

“That’s what worries me. She’s better at running Firstlight than the adults, at this point.” Lucifer snorted and closed his eyes. “But that’s me. That’s my problem. Now. What. The.

Living. Fuck?” Lucifer stared pointedly over his shoulder at a very embarrassed Jericho trying to figure out how to make his wings rescind.

“I was calling you to ask the same thing, Luce.” Malkiel rubbed a hand over his face and sighed.

“You’ve broken. I’ve broken. Vize is broken. From what I’ve heard, Zirriel is close to shattering. Hell, best I can figure, we’re at some kind of crux.”

Malkiel frowned and muttered, “Tulpas? Have anything to do with all those froofy romance novels coming out with angel lovers and shit?”

“Yeah, I thought about that, but honestly, I think the demons are behind it. We’ve reached a point where angels are near dying out, Malkiel. Those that are making pure children are fallen, or close to it. The old ways are dying and I’m seeing some very strong demons up and coming.”

“Have anything to do with a certain scientia practicalis and her future demiurge master?”

“It may be so.” Lucifer frowned and Malkiel tossed him a throw.

“Take a nap. Want me to message anyone?” Malkiel smirked as Lucifer grabbed the blanket and wrapped himself up before flopping onto his side.

“Tell Desiderata that you’re seeing to me and I’ll need a few hours. Tell her I’m exhausted or something. I dunno.” Lucifer waved his hand impatiently.

Malkiel tapped away on his phone. *Luce is at one of my houses, being a little whiny bitch. Can you give him a few*

hours of alone time? I'll keep an eye on him.

Desiderata responded quite quickly. *Thank you for keeping me updated. I had a feeling he was getting overwhelmed, but I think the pit smell is making him nauseous and he's too stubborn to admit it.*

Malkiel frowned and walked to the kitchen, grabbed a glass, and filled it with the fresh spring water. He walked back. "Take a sniff." He offered the glass to Lucifer and watched him go pale and fight from the blanket toward his bathroom, where he locked himself inside, made worse by the scent of the water in there, no doubt.

Yep. Tested it. Malkiel fired back to Desiderata.

"Can you and your mates stay topside for a while? You're reacting to hell stink." Malkiel tapped on the door.

"Traitor! You were chatting up Desi rather than simply telling her I need a moment!" Lucifer nearly sobbed from within the restroom.

"Hippocratic oath or something. Fuck if I know. Get a nap." Malkiel knocked again and made his way to the kitchen to pull some things out for a meal. Egg sandwiches. He knew Luce tolerated them. "Jericho? Egg sandwich?"

"Yes!" Jericho bounced into the kitchen, cheeks still flushed. He glanced around and leaned into Malkiel's side, whispering. "Is Lucifer always that—you know?"

"He's got his moments around rush time, but a lot of this is baby related, I guess. Or not. He wasn't this lenient with Malacoda..." Malkiel furrowed his brow in thought. He'd

noticed Lucifer changing for some time, but he was right.

“Things are changing.”

“For the better, I hope?” Jericho stared up at Malkiel and folded into his arms.

“Come what may, it’ll always be better.”

Chapter Twelve

Jericho

Having spent a rush with Malkiel was a dream, losing himself to the love and power. There, they made love long and loud into the morning. It was rather like a honeymoon, a few days of lust and love of an evening, soft touch, and sweet nothings in the day. But once it was over, he went back where he belonged, not to his aunt's home or Malkiel's, even. Vize's home needed them, like they were meant to be together as a family of sorts. Cora thought so, at least.

Jericho sat in the den while the children did their morning studies, engulfed in the tail end of Sonnoth's fuckery. It'd taken him nearly a month to sort everything out, and Malkiel said that with Jericho there with Vize, he stayed calm and left him to see to other things, like the school. And with Lucifer's belly showing, he was no good as the public face of Firstlight.

"Jericho?" a timid voice called. *Peter*. Jericho peeked up politely, giving him a receptive smile that made him grin.

"Could you help me with this problem? You're very good at math." Peter extended his little notebook, and Jericho furrowed his brow at Peter's algebra and ran his eyes down the page. He'd tried hard, but the right answer wouldn't come.

Jericho stared at it for a lingering moment, trying to remember the signs and symbols from his day in school before lighting up. "Multiplication and division in the order they come. Not multiplication *then* division." Jericho pulled a pen out of his bag and ticked where the error had started, and Peter

settled next to Jericho to rework the problem stubbornly. He'd learned not to help Peter too much. He wanted to please people, not be a burden. All the same, Jericho kept an eye on him and cleared his throat when Peter skipped a step.

Having completed it, Jericho checked it over in detail and nodded his approval. "Very good. You'll be an accountant in no time."

"That sounds boring." Peter huffed and brought up another problem to work on but kept close to Jericho all the same.

"What do you want to study?" Jericho stretched out and petered with a few lines on a spreadsheet. He was waiting for some info from HR to come back and technically had little else to do until he could get corroborating evidence.

"Rachael said I'd make a good psychologist, but I think I want to help people a little differently. Miss Cass was a social worker before everything and I like that, I think." Peter shrugged, and Jericho patted his head. Peter leaned into the affection.

"What did your daddies say?"

"Dad says I can do whatever I want and he'll pay for it. Pappa says that he only wants me to be happy." Peter said the last part like it was an impossible task.

"Well, how do you feel about going to school after the summer? With other half imps?" Jericho chuckled and Peter frowned.

"I want to, but I think that a bunch of us together makes a big target." Peter put his schoolwork down.

“Lucifer himself is protecting the school.”

“Yeah, but once he has Ella, he’s going to be distracted.”
Peter stared down at the floor.

“When Moon came, did they get distracted from you?”
Jericho rested a hand on his head and put his computer to the side.

“A little. Maybe? Not really.” Peter stared at the floor guiltily.

“Ahh. You needed more attention and suddenly had a little less.” Jericho pursed his lips.

“Yeah. I had to share with Moon.”

“Well. Aunt Cass has been paying you some attention, hm?”

Peter grinned and shied away. “I miss Momma a lot. And Miss Cass is really nice to me.”

“You’d tell me if Simon and Elliot weren’t paying you enough attention, would you?” Jericho pulled back and caught Peter’s eye. He nodded quietly.

“I could get more, but I feel bad. It’s Moon’s turn to have all the lovin’ and stuff.”

“Peter. Do not, for a second, think that you’re making it easier for everyone to stay quiet. Be loud. Speak up. Say ‘Pappa, I want to go do this.’” Jericho laughed. ““I want to spend the afternoon doing that. I want a new toy or to go on vacation or visit a theme park!””

“I don’t want any of that. I’m not sure what I want, really. My therapist is trying to get me to speak up, but it’s hard to

say something that I want when I have everything but still feel like I'm missing something." Peter frowned. "It's like a puzzle with one piece left over, but the picture looks whole."

"Huh." Jericho frowned. "Well... Ever had an adult play hooky from school with you?" Jericho closed his computer.

Peter's eyes lit up. "Mom used to sneak me out and take me for frozen yogurt whenever I was having a really bad day. But nobody else likes sweet stuff... Uncle Vize gives me ice cream here, but it's not the same."

Jericho pulled out his phone and thumbed about. There was a fro-yo place about fifteen minutes out and he tilted his phone to show Peter. "This looks fun?"

Peter's eyes brightened. "Yes!"

"Vize! Can I borrow your sedan? Peter and I are going to play hooky and get some fro-yo. Want anything?"

Cora whined. "I wanna go, too!"

Peter seemed like he might wilt, but Jericho waved her off. "We'll do something fun later, me and you. Now is Peter time. I can bring you something back though."

Vize smiled understandingly and nodded. "Bring me back something with an unreasonable amount of chocolate."

"I want the pineapple stuff with caramel all over it!" Cora bounced, eyes bright and wide.

Kir and Zaya retched, and Xander blinked up curiously.

"May I please have some of the plain stuff?" Xander sat up with bright attention.

“The plain tart? Any toppings?” Jericho opened his phone and tapped out notes.

“Carrot chips?” Xander brightened.

“Carob?”

“Yeah, the ones that taste like good chocolate.”

Peter and Jericho made lingering eye contact and shuddered. *Carob*. Whoever thought raisins needed a wax form was sadly mistaken.

“Moon?” Peter poked his baby sister, and she twisted her lips in thought.

“Peppermint and some chocolate sauce.” Moon nodded succinctly and Peter glanced over at Jericho who gave a thumbs-up.

Jericho and Peter headed out quickly. “We’ll eat ours first, get everyone else’s after. We’ll have a little fun.”

And Peter laughed excitedly, bright and happy. Whatever about his magic had manifested, people opened up around him so easily.

Jericho yawned and made sure the bedroom door was open. Vize’s rush was due and Cora, knowing she could get away with it, would sneak in eventually.

“Jericho, have you given much thought to our coming rush?” Malkiel nosed the back of Jericho’s neck when he

settled in, cuddling close. He fit so well in Malkiel's arms that it was a sin almost not to snuggle in.

"I already told you. If a baby happens, it happens and I'm okay with that. If it doesn't, it doesn't." Jericho shrugged. "And it may not even be your fault. Lucifer has no idea what I am other than unique."

"I've been doing my reading, but the best I got is that you should be awe-inspiring, terrifying, the head of animals and some stuff. I don't know." Malkiel ground his hips against Jericho teasingly and hummed with soft delight.

"Better cut that out before our Ducky comes a-quacking." Jericho chuckled and Malkiel's hands wandered but stayed innocent above his navel and purposefully avoiding his nipples.

"I'll keep it innocent. We'll have enough of the rush in a few days. Yours came right after Vize's, but I know that couples who cohabit often experience a shifting of estrus, so the cycle may change a bit to keep us from overlapping." Malkiel kissed the back of Jericho's neck every few words, worshipping the tender skin there.

"Ducky's like your own kid, too, isn't she?" Jericho fought the tingling need that had his cock twitching.

Cold showers. Places where leaves can get after fucking outside. Naked grandmas.

Which grandma? There's some hot GMILFs out there... A soft glow overtook Jericho's skin that had nothing to do with said GMILFs

Jericho grumbled in frustration. “Please. Stop. We can wait our turn.”

“But I love watching you light up for me like a sexy little lightning bug. How many blinks means you’re ready to mate?”

Jericho pawed at Malkiel and they laughed, wrestling with one another until a soft knock interrupted them.

They glanced over and Cora stood in the doorway, in her little footie pajamas, tail swishing through the slit in the back, a stuffed duck in one hand by a leg. “Unca Malkiel... Can I sleep with you and Uncle Jericho?”

“Of course, Ducky. Come on.” Malkiel straightened up and rearranged the pillows before Cora sleepily shuffled in and crawled into bed over their feet.

“I don’t feel good.” She rubbed at her eyes and sniffled. Malkiel flipped on the nightstand light and her eyes were a little glassy, nose too pink, cheeks flushed. He leaned over and felt her cheeks with the back of his hand and nodded.

“Sniffles?”

She nodded.

“Want some hot tea and cuddles?” Malkiel slid from bed and plucked her up to sit on his hip, and Jericho followed them to the kitchen with a blanket, throwing it over her shoulders before taking her into his arms while Malkiel puttered about with some sleepy tea with a little mint and honey to help.

“Is this an angel thing or a demon thing?” Jericho rocked a fussy Cor in her bundles and kissed her warm forehead.

“Either. It’s their magic. Too much at once as it comes in. It’s like growing pains.” Malkiel tended to the hot water kettle.

“Oh, poor baby. That can’t feel good, can it?” Jericho rocked a whimpering Cora all snuggled happily in her blanket.

“Nothing for it but some rest and tea. Isn’t that right, Ducky?” Malkiel grinned as he poured water over the concoction and blew on the little cup before carrying it to the fridge for an ice cube, presumably to cool it down.

Cora stuck her hands out of the folds of the blanket and pulled the cup from Malkiel to sip appreciatively.

“Everything alright?” Tohu stepped in, hair wet from a shower. He eyed Cora, his face melting.

“Aww, you sick again?”

Cora nodded but tucked in with her cup of tea. “Yep. Uncles are taking care of me.” She forced a little smile that made Jericho melt.

“You sure?” Tohu felt over her forehead and glanced to Malkiel, who nodded.

“I’m fine, just icky.”

Malkiel held up an empty mug and Tohu eyed it. “Two please, if you’ve got water on. I’ll take it back up.”

“Extra honey?” Malkiel petered about.

“Yes, please. And thank you two so much. I know you’re new together and, Jericho, I know you don’t understand much about angels yet—” Tohu offered an apologetic smile.

“No, I understand completely. Vize is so adorable when he’s got the giggle fits! And he’s such a scaredy cat.” Jericho

offered Tohu his best smile and received a nod of thanks in response.

“You two wait until you have one. We can swap. Vize loves babies so much.” Tohu chuckled.

“That’s an if, Tohu. I don’t want to get the boy’s hopes up.” Malkiel offered Tohu two mugs and smiled.

“You’d be surprised. I think it’s easier than you might think and baby dust has been floating about. Vize wants another, Lucifer is expecting, Malacoda is trying, and Gemory hasn’t stopped trying. It must be your turn.” Tohu smirked. “The whole cohabitation thing changes a lot.”

Malkiel frowned in thought. “We’ll see. Ducky is enough for now.”

“Yep.” Jericho nodded and Cora’s little smile widened, but the cup in her hands sagged as she closed her eyes.

“Aaaand there we go, out like a light.” Tohu leaned down and pecked a kiss over her head, and Malkiel took the cup from her hands.

“She’ll be in our bed tonight if you want to check on her.” Malkiel gestured for Jericho to stand and they turned out the lights, Tohu pausing for a moment.

“*Our* bed? Malkiel, since when did you acknowledge living here?” Tohu snorted.

“Dammit, go give Vize his kissy time, okay?” Malkiel rolled his eyes and Jericho chuckled, following in tow.

From in the folds of the blanket, Cora sleepily muttered, “Gross.”

They slid back into bed, piling on an extra blanket to let Cora have her bundle. Malkiel, though, used to these kinds of nights, separated from Jericho and made a well between them of pillows and nestled Cora into it. Malkiel got comfy and rested a hand over her forehead. "I'll keep watch over her like this." He yawned and closed his eyes, drifting off, and Jericho followed suit, memorizing the beauty of Malkiel falling asleep helping Cora.

Chapter Thirteen

Malkiel

“I keep telling you, it’s fine.” Malkiel rolled his eyes. Watching Lucifer pace around, big as a cow, was its own reward.

“Of course it’s fine. Nothing has been finer in the history of ever. Malkiel, my empire is falling apart and I’m hiding away, fat and pregnant and my feet hurt, and let me tell you, I’ve not been able to have good sex for like a month and I’m *so* over it.” Lucifer seethed, his eyes full silver, unable to hold his glamour.

“Abaddon has everything under control. Malacoda assured me. I’m sure they’ve all assured you, too.” Malkiel felt over Lucifer’s stomach and sighed with annoyance.

“And I’m what? Irrelevant now?” Lucifer wrestled from his shirt irritably and let his golden wings out, twitching them.

“No, you’re on family leave.” Malkiel stepped back as Lucifer flicked his wings with irritation.

“You keep saying that, but someone will find out, mark my words.” Lucifer huffed and rubbed over the dome of his stomach, the bulge of child incongruent to the scarred tattoos and great stature he bore. He indeed was a mate built for a strong angel.

“And? You can still smite with the best of them.” Malkiel snickered and earned a glare.

“And I’ll start with you if you don’t can it.” Lucifer gave Malkiel his worst glare, but that threat had stopped working a long time ago.

“What was it Rachael called you? Lucifer Morning—”

“Not a word! Last warning, patience is absolutely—” Lucifer cringed and buckled, resting a hand against the wall, stopping.

“And there we go. Where’s everyone?” Malkiel sauntered from the room and made his way down a rather ostentatious set of stairs in a house that looked barely lived in. Abaddon had taken over the home since his arrival on the surface, sharing with Lucifer while he finished out his pregnancy. The scent of the pit still didn’t agree with him.

“Malkiel, dear. Your mate is an absolute treasure,” Lilith purred. Jericho’s eyes were as big as saucers and that thousand-yard stare told Malkiel all he needed to know.

“Isn’t he though? So, you’re right. Luce was being a little bitch.” Malkiel sighed and Lilith clapped her hands, her dark curls bouncing.

“Oh, I knew I was right. I’ll head up there with him. You’re sticking around, yes?” Lilith gave him a pleading look, and Malkiel sighed.

“Of course, but our rush is due soon. It’s already late.” Malkiel gave Lilith a knowing look, and she nodded sagely.

“Balancing with Vize’s cycle? Poor dear. He’s doing well, yes?” Lilith blossomed with concern.

“Oh, he’s fine. All smiles. Jumpy, but Cora has done a world of good.” Malkiel gave her a forced smile that made her

grin with delight before flouncing off, a few of Luce's mates in tow. Malkiel leaned and watched until they were out of earshot, turning to a rather shaken Jericho. "You alright?"

Jericho nodded. "That woman is—"

"Yep. She's an absolute legend."

"I know more positions now than I ever wanted to know..." Jericho blanched, and Malkiel led him off to a sitting room. He made himself comfortable in a lounge and let Jericho curl up with him.

"Maybe you should show me when the rush starts?" Malkiel chuckled lowly and kept an ear out for Lucifer's swearing and shouting. *He'll be fine.*

Jericho kept his head tilted, listening as well, lips pursing.

"Still want one?" Malkiel raised a brow.

"You know...I'm fine with waiting." Jericho flinched as Lucifer's voice roared out.

"You are not naming her Mazikim!"

Malkiel hissed with sympathy. "He hated that name."

With a half-hearted snicker, Malkiel wandered to the doorway and shouted up, "What about Karen?"

"Fuck! You!" Lucifer's seething voice echoed downstairs and the lights to the house flickered.

"Too far?" Malkiel glanced at Jericho, who shrugged in response.

The bell for the front door chimed as someone came in and Malkiel investigated, catching Rachael and Simon as they

made their way in. Simon glanced up. “I know better than to question when Rachael summons.”

“Is Mister Lucy still being a b-word?” Rachael blinked up at Malkiel, and Simon hissed a warning at her.

“Rachael!” Simon gasped.

“Yep. Full-blown C U Next Tuesday.” Malkiel sighed.

“Malkiel, don’t encourage her, please.” Simon wilted, slowly losing a handle on the girl, still not realizing that he’d lost her long ago. “Aren’t you going back up there?”

Malkiel glared at Simon and shrugged. “How about *you* go up there?”

“Touché.” Simon took a seat and pulled out his phone while Rachael sat nearby, equally content to pester about. Jericho, however, kept his ear tuned in to the noise upstairs, concern in his eyes.

“Demons have it so much easier.” Simon quirked a brow, and Jericho sank down shyly.

“Yeah. Angels don’t have it much easier, but we love harder when we find it. Demons love easier.” Malkiel smiled and caught himself tracing his fingers through Jericho’s hair. It was getting a little longer, and he enjoyed the locks, wrapping them around his fingers.

“Apparently I’m the best of both worlds.” Simon grinned and Malkiel snorted.

It wasn’t long, lazing about in wait, before footsteps broke down the stairs and Lilith peeked into the room. “Malkiel. He’s close and is asking for you.”

Malkiel jumped up and gave Jericho a squeeze before following Lilith up the stairs, yawning as he went. He'd never seen an angel in danger during a birth before, but managing pain and healing always came with its own difficulties.

Malkiel stepped in, hands in his pockets, ready to razz Lucifer a little but found himself being shoved and a towel pressed into his chest until he groped for it.

In the way that great things come to pass, he didn't recall there being screaming or swearing. Nor did he focus on Lucifer's bare body, only the excitement and surprise when a small girl slid into his waiting towel-laden hands. Silence spread and Malkiel folded the towel so gently, dabbing at her face until she grunted with protest. Thick dark hair stuck up at odd angles over her head and Malkiel could see so much of Luce in her at a glance.

He checked her over, counting ten toes, ten fingers, and her heart sang with budding magic sure to blossom in time.

Desiderata cooed softly and helped Malkiel to cut and tie the cord before offering her to Luce, his exhausted eyes vacant of his usual anger and malice. And like any other patient, Malkiel wordlessly saw to his healing and cleaning, working carefully to tuck him back into his blankets.

"You're the only one not related or mated to me that I trust implicitly, Malkiel." Lucifer glanced up, arms full of child.

"Why?" Malkiel huffed and raised a brow. It wasn't like Luce to say sentimental things.

“Because you’re too lazy to go through the effort of betraying me. Literally, you’re the definition of sloth.” Lucifer narrowed his gaze and whined when Desiderata took her in her slender arms.

“Ella.” Desiderata beamed.

“That’s a very beautiful name.” Malkiel offered Lucifer a smile as his eyes stung and tears trailed his cheeks.

“Come here.” Lucifer gestured Malkiel to come to his side. “Kneel.”

Malkiel did so, obedient as long as it was convenient. “My lord?”

Lucifer flicked his head. “You’re next, asshole.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be the bearer, per se.”

“I’m a demiurge. I could change that!” Lucifer sneered, and Malkiel rolled his eyes.

“Everything looks good. She’s absolutely adorable. Rachael is probably wanting to come see.” Malkiel stood and stretched.

Lucifer gave him a withering look as Desiderata nodded in approval. “Might as well. Luce has been so much more vibrant since the little imp came around.” Desiderata handed little Ella to Lucifer and moved to sit beside him, Lilith taking his other side. “And maybe we can go back home tonight. I’d so love for her to spend her first night in the nursery. We worked really hard to build that out, dear.”

Lucifer nodded and stroked over the little one’s head and dismissed Malkiel with a wave of his hand. “Give me a little

bit to feed her and get a shirt on.”

Malkiel waved back and trotted out, meandering his way downstairs and stared at Jericho who lay curled on his side, gently snoozing. Rachael and Simon glanced up expectantly.

“Cigarette time?” Malkiel fished in his pockets and found a pack that was probably stale. Simon nodded and stood.

“When we come back, I’ll take you to see Luce. He’s feeding Ella.” Malkiel waved to Rachael, and she nodded, going back to her phone.

“You weren’t gone that long. How was it?” Simon rested a hand on Malkiel’s shoulder.

“I got there in time to play catch. It was honestly a blur.” Malkiel chuckled in surprise before sliding outside with Simon.

“Everything *really* okay?” Simon gave Malkiel a penetrating gaze. Those silvery eyes rang too much of angel for someone demonic.

“Some idle threats on Luce’s part, but I’m a little sad that Jericho hasn’t caught.” Malkiel frowned, and Simon shrugged.

“I’m a fucking incubus, and my brother is a demon of pure luck. Even Robin is having trouble getting pregnant. I’m waiting for Peter to get older to try again, personally. He needs me.” Simon swallowed hard.

Malkiel offered Simon a cigarette and accepted a light from the tip of his finger. Inhaling deeply, he stared out into the cool afternoon. The sunlight would wane soon and they might hit their rush again. “But he deserves—”

“He has what he wants, which is you. Also, Cora would be insulted if she heard you. She thinks she’s all of your guys’ baby.” Simon snorted.

“She’s always been my little girl. I was the first to ever hold her. When she cried so much Vize couldn’t handle it, she quieted in my arms.” Malkiel hid a smile before staring up at the sky, blinking the thought of tears away.

“And I think that’s what you need to keep in mind. There’s a point where you accept that they’re enough, and then I think that something ether, else, decides if our hearts have grown enough.” Simon flicked ash and frowned. “But what do I know?”

“You know. Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind. It is enough for now. He thinks I’m enough.”

“Right. And with Lucifer’s screaming, I think he might be less keen on the whole baby deal so fast.” Simon chuckled and bumped shoulders with Malkiel, and for the first time, he understood the gesture. Contact, touch without any other purpose other than to say that *this moment is special*.

“Yeah. Hey, Simon?” Malkiel glanced down, blinking a few times to pass the moment.

“Hmm?”

“I think... You know angels can’t really show their feelings, not really well, right?”

“I know you guys lack personality, but Vize, Lucifer, and you...” Simon gestured about.

“Lucifer said it was something about breaking...” Malkiel rubbed his neck.

Simon cut his eyes. “Rachael’s had her theories.”

“And?”

“Honestly, if we’re all the result of what humans think... How many TV shows here recently have completely rewritten human imagination?” Simon snorted.

“Oh. Yeah. Have I told you Vize’s infatuation with that *Little Nicky* movie?”

“I heard, and let me tell you, Rachael did not find it funny at all.” Simon snickered.

“See, Luce said something along those lines, but he’s got a big thumb on media these days.” Malkiel frowned.

“He does, doesn’t he? Heh. Seems like he wanted to rewrite himself. Though, it’s any guess as to how Vize ended up being relevant.” Simon picked at his fingernail almost boredly.

Malkiel took the final drag off his cigarette before flicking the butt onto Lucifer’s immaculate steps and stepping it out. He picked up the butt and put it in a nearby little ashtray, but the black streak sat there out of defiance. “I think it’s less of who Vize is and more about what he represents. Angels are seen as this all-knowing and wise thing. We’re getting smarter, I’m sure, but we’re not the warriors we once were.” Malkiel shrugged.

“Oooh, that is true.” Simon rubbed his chin.

With a resigned sigh, Malkiel headed back in, Simon following behind, bumping into him as he stopped, eyes on a gently sleeping Jericho. “He’s so pretty when he’s asleep.”

“He is, isn’t he, Uncle Malkiel!” Rachael beamed and bounded up, hands clasped excitedly. “Can I go see Ella and Mister Lucy now? I want to make fun of him some more!”

“Sweetheart. Please stop razzing the dark prince, okay?” Simon sighed raggedly.

“He secretly likes it. That’s how Lilith keeps him in line, is what she says.” Rachael hummed, and Simon followed her up while Malkiel took a lingering minute to stare at Jericho a little longer.

Chapter Fourteen

Jericho

Jericho stretched and yawned, stirred by a warm sensation nagging at his insides. The familiar urgency of a rush stirred in his belly, made worse by Malkiel's hot, worshiping gaze. He could see for miles into the blown-out pupils and gasped softly when Malkiel lifted him bridal style, holding that heated stare.

"You smell like blood and cigarettes. Is all well?" Jericho nestled into Malkiel's firm arms and smiled.

"Lucifer is as surly as ever, but he's fine." Malkiel walked toward the stairs and up, setting Jericho onto his feet ever so gently as they reached the top floor and toward the bustling room with double doors wide open and fawning men and women flitting about.

Jericho hung back, still not quite accustomed to being in Lucifer's presence and still reserved, being a formerly unclaimed mate.

"You! Come here." Lucifer pointed at Malkiel and Jericho and snapped his fingers.

Malkiel stepped forward and paused when Lucifer waved him off.

"Not you, the seraphim, Jericho!" Lucifer lay back against his pillows and sighed, a hand rested over the blankets of his bed, over his newly flat stomach.

Jericho came forward and Lucifer stared him down, eyes that unfamiliar silver. "My lord?"

Lucifer gestured for a soft blonde woman at his side next to a violently ginger man, Forneus, to move. Jericho approached and Lucifer waved for him to sit on the side of the bed, which he did so, heart beating rapidly.

“I’ll blame this today on hormones and whatnot, but you are something very special, Jericho. I don’t know what you’re for, but I sense your power. And one day I will want to step down from all this. I may put one of my sons in control for a time, or Xander even, but I want you close. I see truth in your eyes and honesty in your heart. There is a purity within you that no angel or demon will ever have. There’s a song in your soul that will sing once we find out what it is that you mean to us. We have been blessed by knowledge and future. The oracles reveal to me what is coming, and the scientia tell me what is. But you?” Lucifer stared Jericho down. “You will fit in, complementary to the others. Where Robin has manifested Felix and our little Xander the next Demiurge to fill my shoes... He’ll need many to guide him.”

“He has lovely parents and Xander is a sweet and cautious boy, quite observant.” Jericho offered a smile.

With a withering sneer, Lucifer rolled his eyes. “The boy is calculative. If he’s nice, it’s because it benefits him. If he’s sweet, it’s because you want him to be. His observance is pure hunger as he watches the world around him.” Lucifer took a deep breath.

“I would never have thought such a thing, my lord.” Jericho covered his lips.

“I was young and hotheaded once, myself—” Lucifer cringed when Lilith barked out a laugh, startling Ella into a

yelp of sound that went straight into loud tears.

Jericho swept over and offered to take her, scooping the small child into his arms. She settled, taking his warmth in and silencing until Jericho slipped her into Lucifer's waiting arms with a lost smile.

“As I was saying. I'm rash, and I never had counsel, which is what Xander will have. He will have an unequivocal secretary capable of many things, and a seraphim that will guard him as diligently as his own, yes? You have to have so much power.”

“Why would such a task fall to me, my lord?” Jericho reached a hand out to rest on Ella as she squirmed, ready to fuss once more.

“Because Xander picks people he likes, and he likes Rachael. He likes his parents, and he likes me to some extent. And I've seen him interact with you. He feels the urge to impress you, and that's a big thing now. He will be dangerous one day. And I have spoken to many oracles that say Robin and Malacoda will not bear another demiurge, so we are thankful for that.” Lucifer nodded sagely.

“Thank you for this trust, my lord. It means a lot.” Jericho bowed his head and Rachael stepped over, patting his shoulder.

“I suppose it's Uncle Jericho, now. I like that. Uncle J. Anyway. I think you and Uncle Malkiel need to head home. You two do a lot for everyone else and haven't taken any time to be with one another. Go have some private time. Even Pappa and Daddy need time together sometimes.” Rachael beamed and glanced over at a sweetly smiling Simon.

“Good. Before we go though. Rachael, I’d like you to give our Ella a middle name.” Lucifer stared at Ella.

Rachael gave her soft head a gentle rub.

Simon flinched, waiting for something, and Rachael smiled. “Faye. I like how that sounds. Ella Faye Firstlight.”

“Anything special behind the meaning?” Lucifer glanced up, and Rachael shook her head.

“I don’t think putting expectations to live up to someone else would be a good thing. She’ll be a shy baby, and she feels like Uncle Vize. Ella Faye sounds cute. It’ll be her own name to live up to.” Rachael smiled, and Lucifer nodded sagely, smiling at her.

“Beautiful. I love your wisdom. Never lose that insight, Rachael. It’ll carry you well.” Lucifer reached out and Rachael leaned forward as if to accept a head pat, but Lucifer only grasped her shoulder with a soft squeeze. “Secretaries don’t get head pats.”

“You finally listened. Thank you.”

“But you tell me if Xander ever gives you the other kind and I will put that boy in a world of timeout.” Lucifer chuckled, and all seemed right with the world as Malkiel pulled Jericho away.

“May we be on our way?” Malkiel’s arms rested on Jericho’s shoulders.

“Absolutely. Rachael is right. Take your time with one another. I think when things calm down and you’re the most comfortable, things will go better.” Lucifer waved them off

and smiled down at little Ella while Malkiel shimmered them, not to his Nevada estate but to Vize's home.

Malkiel walked in, a wary smile on his face as they made their way around the house searching out Vize. It didn't take long before Cora's giggles and Tohu's fussing met their ears from the backyard. When they opened the door to the little pebbled-stone deck, shutting the door behind them, Tohu looked over.

Vize had his arms up in the air and Cora had shifted, letting her wings free from a little shirt with slits. Tohu fretted nervously when Vize tossed her, letting her flit her wings before catching her.

"Vize, not so high!" Tohu flinched every time, but Cora's squeals and giggles of delight kept him from intervening too much.

"But she's loving it. It's good for her little wings. Lookit!" Vize grinned at Cora's little midnight black and glossy wings. For all she looked like Tohu in ways, she favored Vize with her feathers but still too downy and fluffy to really fly.

When she came to a landing on the next throw, she squealed for her uncles and Vize sat her down, much to Tohu's relief.

"Da said you two was going to have a sleepover tonight. I wanna come!" Cora bounced and Malkiel opened his arms to take her in.

"But I think your da and pappa want time with you tonight. Besides, your uncle Jericho and I are going to be

cuddling and watching boring movies.” Malkiel grinned, and she leaped into his arms, swinging with him as he spun.

“Zaya says tha—” Cora started but Vize shushed her sharply. She ducked down, chastened. “Sorry, Uncle Malkiel.”

“It’s alright. You’re learning. Zaya has different rules than you because Zaya is different.” Malkiel swung her again.

“But why though?”

“Because you have pretty, pretty wings and little silvery eyes and need to learn the happiness in inner words. We don’t say everything in our mind. Because angels get hurt feelings a lot easier, and they can’t cry to show it like your pappa and da can. Your da is a very special angel, and he’s made a very special girl.” Malkiel bounced her on his hip and Vize swept in to take her.

“You two going out for a few nights?” Vize gave them a sweet smile as Cora pouted.

“We’ll come back during the day so Cora isn’t sad.” Malkiel grinned, but Cora folded her arms, pouting.

“Come on, Duckling. This is their night. This is how angels recharge their hearts to be happy.” Vize nuzzled into her hair and earned a few swats away as she struggled.

“Want a compromise?” Jericho offered and Cora paused, glaring at him with minute interest. “I take that as a yes.”

She nodded.

“What if, when we’re done having our vacation, we watch that puppy police show and I let you fix my hair again?”

“I wanna cut it.” Cora glared.

“Tell you what, Ducky. Let’s get Rachael to come over, and I’ll let you help her cut my hair. If you cut Jericho’s hair, there won’t be any left to play with.” Malkiel leaned over and tousled his head a little, letting his unruly waves stick up at all odd angles. Jericho hadn’t found a time yet to really cut it for him, far too wrapped up in kids, work, and the earth-shattering lovemaking.

“Okay!” Cora hopped out of Vize’s arms and gave Malkiel and Jericho a hug before darting inside.

“You spoil her.” Tohu chuckled, and Vize’s cheeks pinkened with delight.

“Lucifer is okay?” Vize asked.

Malkiel nodded. “Yep. All went smoothly. Ella Faye.”

“Oh, that’s so adorable!” Tohu whined and Vize pursed his lips, clear want in his eyes.

“Tohu, I want another one, now,” Vize whined and Malkiel snickered.

“If it happens, it happens, dear. Whatever you want.” Tohu pushed up on his toes to kiss Vize chastely and went off after Cora.

“Awesome. Now you two try, too. I want another baby in this house.” Vize folded his arms sternly.

“I’m sure Malkiel will do his level best.” Jericho chuckled. “But not sure how I feel after I heard Lucifer screaming.”

“Lucifer is dramatic. It doesn’t hurt that ba—” Malkiel ducked as Vize swatted at him to cuff his head.

“It hurts.” Vize frowned.

“Okay! But you didn’t cry out nearly that bad.”

“Cora was very small, and I was ornery. You must forget because she was so sweet.” Vize shook his head, and Jericho knew at that moment, the universe would give them everything they needed.

“Come on, dear. Let’s not bait Vize.” Jericho pulled Malkiel away and forced him to shimmer.

Chapter Fifteen

Malkiel

They barely had a sliver of daylight left when they shimmered, but in the peaks of Malkiel's home, the sunlight still had a little edge to it, ebbing their sensations of urgency. Jericho shared a sigh of utter relief with Malkiel.

"Food first?" Malkiel ran his hands down Jericho's arms and food sounded good but so did having Jericho.

"Freezer raid?"

Malkiel nodded slowly, drunk from want but not too far gone yet.

He dug through the freezer and found some frozen meals, popping them in the microwave. They weren't much, but it was better than nothing. And neither of them could trust the other with a stovetop or oven, in their states.

"Shoulda had Vize pack us a picnic," Jericho mouthed around a fork as Malkiel ate in silence. Jericho must have shared a similar sentiment, tying in until the plastic tray and fork went their separate ways to the sink and trash. With a rumble of pleasure, Malkiel followed Jericho's lead and let himself fall into the warmth and lull of sensation that drew them together so often.

"Maybe next time." Jericho hummed as Malkiel wrapped his arms around him and brought their mouths together, hesitating momentarily.

“Brush teeth?” Malkiel chuckled, and Jericho grinned guiltily. The savory contrast of their debatably food meals tasted foul over their mouths and they laughed their way to the bathroom, purging their tongues with minty foam. Ready for anything, they tossed their brushes onto the counter and struggled breathlessly to the bedroom, clothes melting away under soft lips and wandering hands.

Malkiel remembered the days where he loved so freely, so hard, and never felt it back, but Jericho reciprocated like air itself, taking Malkiel’s breath to give it back to him as their lips brushed.

“Wings. Now.” Jericho’s hand wrapped around Malkiel’s back and drew down, nails raking his flesh with the most delightful sting, letting him summon his wings into being, shrouding them in their dark-red plumage.

Jericho welcomed him with his pale arms draped over Malkiel’s shoulders, knees tented and hips lifted as they came together so easily. Malkiel’s trailing fingers found purchase over Jericho’s chest, toying with one of his delicately pink nipples before moving lower to tease his drooling length on the way to feel his ample slickness. Malkiel slid a finger inside his lover, feeling the sudden clench and ease of pressure. “I want to be inside you, please,” Malkiel whispered as he gave Jericho a second finger and rocked them gently against his spot, drawing out such lovely noises.

Those damning blue eyes stared up at him, drowning him in their glittering coppery depths. “So fucking gorgeous.” Malkiel’s breath wavered, and he drew his fingers out, guiding his length to Jericho’s softened hole.

“Have you looked in a mirror lately? You’re not so bad, yourself.” Jericho clenched and groaned as Malkiel pushed his hips forward. He moved inside Jericho, pushing and drawing his hips in gentle thrusts, not those of lust or hunger but ones of tenderness and love. *Love?*

Malkiel adopted a rhythm and ground against Jericho’s spot with the goal of making him ache and whimper for release. “Flattery...will get you...will get...holy shit...” Malkiel shuddered as his knot threatened to inflate, and he held himself back. Jericho tilted his hips and accepted Malkiel’s rocking motions, welcoming him into the tender heat and depths made specifically for him, that would only ever have him.

“*Mine.*” Malkiel growled the word and reached for Jericho’s cock, pushing one of his knees up to work deeper.

“All yours, Malkiel. All yours. Every bit of me.” Jericho clenched his insides, and Malkiel nearly tumbled but caught his burgeoning orgasm a moment from taking hold.

“Want... Want it to mean something.” Malkiel trembled as his eyes stung and body trembled. Emotion, true and pure, rose within his chest, and tears peppered Jericho’s chest. And caught in a tandem release, Malkiel cried out, coming deep inside Jericho as he pulsed freely up his chest, Malkiel’s knot sealing them.

“It means the world to me every time you look at me.” Jericho brought Malkiel in for a tender kiss.

“But I want you to know. I love you. I admire you so much. I can’t hold how much I love you in at once.” Malkiel fought the tears that overwhelmed him and Jericho kissed

them away, wrapping his legs around Malkiel to keep him buried deep.

“And I love you, too. Even if you forget to comb your hair or shave.”

“It never seems more important than whatever I have going on. You know? If it weren’t for Vize, I’d be lost. And now I have you, and I feel a bit of a fool for not taking care of myself.” Malkiel leaned down to rub noses with Jericho and chuckle, soaking in his warmth, memorizing the moment, a treasure that he’d keep, much like Jericho’s smiles. What they shared was real and—*holy fuck*. Malkiel groaned as Jericho shifted his lips a little, his knot keeping them locked together, still. They both laughed in surprise.

“You’ve never lasted this long.” Jericho tugged and stifled a cry of pleasure. Malkiel shimmied his hips and chuckled, a line of pleasure drawing itself through his body, hips moving of their own volition as he spilled for a second time and relished the sensation of his knot receding.

Like their rushes before, it was comfortable, the two of them, warm and heated for one another, but Malkiel always held a note of insecurity in his heart, praying that Jericho wouldn’t roll away from him in the night, despite the fact that even without lovemaking, Jericho clung to Malkiel. Unlike previously, though, their rush flowered into something comfortable and different. Sure, the sex was plentiful, and within the hour, Jericho was mounting him and riding Malkiel to another release, and a third time soon after that. But no matter what they needed or wanted, Jericho and Malkiel could laugh, and a thousand years or a thousand thousand wasn’t

enough to have all the rushes and quiet nights or fussing mornings with Jericho fretting over his beard and hair.

Magic flowed between them, and Jericho pushed his fingers through Malkiel's hair and relished the messy locks.

"You really going to let Cora cut your hair?" Jericho snorted.

"I let her do it the last time." Malkiel shrugged.

Jericho's eyes widened, and he whispered, "How bad was it?" His warm breath danced in lovely ways over Malkiel's neck as they folded into one another.

"She kept making *oopsies*, so I let her and Zaya shave it all off." Malkiel shrugged, unbothered.

"Oh no." Jericho giggled.

"And my bald head is not very attractive." Malkiel cradled Jericho against him, relishing the wonderful sound of his laughter.

"I refuse to believe it. Angels are so beautiful. Everything about you is gorgeous and perfect. You probably look like that Diesel guy or something." Jericho nuzzled and Malkiel pulled back before brushing his hair off his face.

"Nope. My ears stick out and there's weird wrinkles at the back of my neck and lumps. Moon said I looked like a white avocado."

The image in Jericho's head must have tickled him very much, as the tittering laughter evolved into shaking chuckles that Malkiel wanted to kiss away, stealing the mirth with every pluck of his lips. "No!"

“She spoke the truth. It was bad.” Malkiel pulled Jericho up to nuzzle and kiss him affectionately until a chirp of an alarm pulled them from one another.

“We did promise Ducky breakfast.” Jericho sighed fondly and slipped out of the bed, leaving Malkiel wanton and lonely until he followed Jericho to the bathroom. They showered together, and while Malkiel had taken the boy there multiple times in their months together, this morning was special, and they washed up and dressed in a hurry before shimmering back to Vize’s.

Well rested and full of joy, Jericho and Malkiel caught Vize in the kitchen doing his best to threaten some sort of contraption that promised to make fun-shaped waffles. Jericho stepped in to help and Vize gladly accepted it, being a little helpless when it came to appliances. Malkiel could relate. The demon-designed things were made to be crushed.

“So you add a little oil every time you pour a new one.” Jericho daubed an oiled paper towel around the mold and poured two dinosaur shapes before closing the machine. It beeped and Jericho waited a minute before listening to it beep once more. Vize wanted to pull it out, but Jericho waved him off.

“Wait until it smells done. The beep is just so you don’t wander off and forget it.” Jericho laughed and sniffed, satisfied. He pulled two perfect dinosaurs out of the press and Vize lit up with delight. He took over, replicating Jericho’s steps with some ease and happily produced several more in time for a laughing Cora to announce herself, running circles about Tohu’s feet.

Tohu and Vize exchanged a quick peck of a kiss and went about their duties, Tohu working on making himself some sweet coffee concoction while Cora whined for her coffee, too.

“I got it.” Malkiel reached into the cabinet for a hot cocoa packet and dispensed hot water into a mug with it and a tiny splash of coffee from Tohu’s mug. Cora made grabby hands and Vize beamed proudly as he brought the lovely dinosaur waffles to the table.

“Da! It’s a Tranna-sore-ass rex!” She grabbed a waffle and waved it in his face.

“Speaking of *saurus*.” Tohu glanced over. “Good evening?”

“Wonderful, as always. Though I am looking forward to Ducky’s cut job on my hair.” Malkiel chuckled as Cora looked up in surprise, bare-hand holding a waffle dinosaur with the head bitten off and syrup near up to her elbow.

“I forgot! Can I cut it today?” Cora bounced excitedly.

“Nope. Not until vacation is over. Remember my promise?” Malkiel bit the tail off a waffle and searched for some syrup before flooding his plate. A few drizzles and daubs later, Malkiel and Jericho enjoyed dinosaur waffles like everyone else.

After a little visit with Cora and handling a bit of business, Malkiel looked forward to taking Jericho back to his place...no, *their* place. Malkiel would share everything with his mate. Because Jericho was the only thing he had that mattered.

Chapter Sixteen

Jericho

“You sure about this, Malkiel?” Jericho gave Malkiel his best smile and toyed with his frazzled hair.

“Yeah. I’m sure. It’ll grow back.” Malkiel stole a kiss. “I’m more worried about the movie.”

“Good grief, if I have to watch that stupid puppy movie one more time—” Jericho muffled under Malkiel’s mouth, sinking into the love.

“Come. No more kissy time until Cora gets her promise.” Malkiel nuzzled Jericho and left their room, Jericho chuckling.

“You’ll be a wonderful father someday. I know.” And Jericho did know it. From the top of his head to the warm fuzzy feeling in the pit of his stomach, like his rush still lingered. *Maybe...*

Vize had said, some time ago, that he knew that he was pregnant by resting his hand on his belly and suddenly feeling another soul. Jericho wondered what a soul felt like and curiously pressed his hand to his belly. *Please...* He wasn’t certain what he felt, but Jericho’s powers always felt clear and bubbly, even after bonding; his magic didn’t taint with angelic silver, but what he felt beneath his fingertips was silver. Had Malkiel left his trace or something else? Jericho silently wished, closing his eyes, holding his hand there.

A soft throat clearing distracted him, Vize’s head poking in their room.

“Hey.” Jericho pulled his hand away as if shocked and glanced away, cheeks on fire.

“May want to come say goodbye to Malkiel’s rat’s nest.” Vize tilted his head a little, grinning. “Are you?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know. I was being silly.” Jericho’s cheeks burned.

“Never. When I felt Cora, it was such a strange sensation. Let me feel. I can tell. I’m no Malkiel, but I love easily and my power is decent.” Vize swept over and Jericho lifted his arms for a quick pat down, a hand resting on his belly.

“O-okay.” Jericho closed his eyes, nervous.

“Well, it’s very early, but I think you are. Best you hold on to the news for when Malkiel is sad later about his head.” Vize gave Jericho a lingering hug and bounded off, grinning.

Jericho nervously made his way to the back deck where Malkiel sat on the ground, legs crossed, letting Cora and Rachael at his hair. They spritzed him with water and combed it, Rachael telling a far-too-eager Cora to chill a bit, to measure by finger and—Jericho flinched as Cora cut a hunk off, thick brown locks peppering the ground.

“Cora! No! Uncle Malkiel looks like a Mr. Potato Head if we have to shave his head again.” Rachael growled and sighed exasperatedly. Simon’s peppery laughter lit the air, and Jericho bit back tears at the wonderful thought of this being the family that he’d bear a child into. The thought of a little boy or girl in Malkiel’s arms, playing with Cora, letting Vize help teach her to fly...teach the both of them to fly. Jericho still hadn’t gotten

the hang of it quite yet, and with six wings in the stead of two—things got weird.

Taking the opportunity, Jericho took his shirt off and let his wings free, his skin just the slightest bit aglow. “We going to watch the movie after?” Jericho got several dirty looks from adults in response as Moon and Cora cheered. *Oops*.

Vize gave him a forgiving smile and took him to the side, helping him stretch his wings while Malkiel hunkered down like a shamed dog, hair falling around him at the guide of a rather exasperated Rachael.

“Your wings are gorgeous. I still wish Lucifer was able to gather more information, but even the oracles were shocked. You know?” Vize seated Jericho on the brick, ornamental wall caging in the back patio and worked his wings rather like a massage, studying them. “And they look normal, move normally, but when you separate them...” Vize hummed.

“I still don’t know what to think of it.” Jericho ducked down and chuckled. “By the by, I had lunch with my aunt last week! She adores you, you know? And Kalamax’s estate was given to her as payment for raising me.”

Vize chuckled nervously. “She’s good for the kids, I think. Keeping them at home was okay, but they do need to get out there. I can’t keep Duckling in the nest, you know?”

“I think it’s a rather excellent idea, myself.” A wisp of smoke and scent of sulfur from the pit raised everyone’s hackles, and they stared warily at a rather severe man with a finger’s length of hair on top, shorn-on-the-sides haircut. Everything about him screamed *neutral* in the most threatening way possible. He radiated the same threatening

energy that Malacoda could and Luce always did, and spite twinkled in his golden eyes.

“Abaddon,” Vize acknowledged before going back to stretching Jericho’s wings.

“Vize. It is a pleasure to see you. I apologize for intruding.” He spoke stiffly, but his words had a feeling of truth to them.

“I appreciate you acknowledging that you’ve trespassed. Now, how may I help you?” Vize stared blatantly at Abaddon for a lingering moment before he skirted the angel’s gaze and sat on the brick wall nearby.

“Uh. Well. Fathers and mothers are very occupied, as are my siblings, but I heard my nephew was here and thought I might ask to be permitted to, erm...be around people here. To impose.” Abaddon cleared his throat, and that honest energy radiated nervousness.

“Oh, you were lonely.” Vize rolled his eyes. “Why not say it?”

“I’m not lonely. I just wished for more enthusiastic company.” Abaddon perked up when Xander came running over, bouncing.

“Uncle Don!” Xander’s little pensive expression brightened.

“Ahh, there’s my little sinner. Come here. Come to Uncle. I brought some of the snacks from the pit you like.” Abaddon melted under Xander’s adoration and knelt down to offer him a pack of something that looked very much like seaweed nori rice crackers caked with every sort of spice. Vize leaned away

from the scent of them, and Jericho found his mouth drooling in the *I'm about to puke* way. He swallowed it down and Vize pulled his wings free before wafting a little fresh air to keep Jericho comfortable.

“Thanks.” Jericho chuckled, and Xander beamed up at Abaddon.

“Watch the puppy movie with us, Uncle Don!” Xander bounced a little, uncharacteristically joyous. The boy opened for Abaddon, and Rachael’s periodic but unsurprised glances told Jericho it wasn’t a new occurrence.

“Please, *Uncle Don*.” Vize’s voice went syrupy. “Come watch the puppy patrol movie.”

Abaddon, who had so far been unburdened by the experience, agreed politely, eager to spend time with them for some reason.

“Don’t get me wrong, I welcome you here if Xander approves, and I know you’re lonely, but why not with Luce or your brothers?” Vize raised a brow.

“Father has gone back to the pit to care for Ella for a time. I am seeing to things at Firstlight, so the house is empty... Traveling back and forth is exhausting, and I’m not my father when it comes to adjusting... And I...” Abaddon shrugged.

“Lonely.” Vize nodded in agreement and smirked. “Then you’re welcome here as long as you follow the rules.”

“What’s the rules?” Abaddon piped up.

“Don’t be a dick!” Moon shouted.

Rachael blinked slowly, and Simon swore under his breath.

“Yes. That.” Vize smirked.

“I think I can manage that.” Abaddon nodded sharply, and that seemed to end the discussion.

Abaddon and Xander meandered over to watch Cora and Rachael try to tame Malkiel’s hair when Vize sidled up to Jericho. “What’s your take?”

Jericho slanted his gaze and huffed a single laugh. “I think he’s lonely, yes. But I also feel like he’s gotten his hopes up on finding a mate. He’s looking at us like an ideal.”

“So, loneliness and hope?” Vize frowned.

“Something like that? I think he’s trying though.” Jericho lost himself, staring out at Malkiel and the others, not sure if he wanted to go near him, to tell him or let him figure it out. He wondered, briefly, if Malkiel knew already. *Likely not.*

With Malkiel’s hair sufficiently butchered, they made their way into the den and Jericho stifled the occasional giggle. Rachael gave Jericho a few apologetic glances before settling down with Xander to watch the movie. She pulled a nail grooming set out of her pocket and tended to his sharp nails while he engrossed himself, seemingly enjoying the attention. Lucifer knew what he was doing by keeping her around him, and Rachael seemed to have him well-maintained.

Jericho leaned in back with Vize, watching shrewdly. Abaddon watched the show, likely for the first time, and held an expression of confusion, or maybe disgust. Perhaps gas? In any case, Vize seemed to be enjoying his reaction greatly.

“So, you think this whole Rachael and Xander situation is healthy? He’ll never learn to be independent if she’s not around.” Jericho frowned.

“I rather think that’s the point. Rachael will guide him, and angering her or harming her loses him the one thing he cares about more than anything until he finds a mate. Rachael is the perfect solution to a demiurge. As a scientia practicalis, she’ll know his moods and reactions better than anyone else and can help him make better decisions and hope to goodness, he skips the few hundred years of weird fucking terror that Luce unleashed.” Vize shrugged. “What Xander is can be dangerous.”

Jericho shrugged. “I’ve seen his parents. I don’t think we have much to worry over. Malacoda is very open and calm, and Robin is like the wind. He goes with the flow. Neither have the anger or behavior that would teach something like that to Xander.”

“Maybe. We can hope.” Vize grinned and turned his attention back to the screen.

As the movie drew on, Malkiel scooped a snoozing Cora into his arms as Rachael disappeared with Xander in a waft of smoke. Simon gathered Moon, and Malkiel made his way to Cora’s room and settled her into bed as quietly as possible. She snuggled right in and Malkiel snuck away, letting Vize finish her nighttime routine with Tohu.

Jericho gave Malkiel a soft smile, one he hoped looked inviting, and headed toward their bedroom. Malkiel didn’t smile like he often did, his face a mask of true emptiness, hiding sadness of a kind.

“You alright?” Jericho drew Malkiel’s face to his as they shut the bedroom door, kissing him sweetly.

“I’m fine. Jealous a little, maybe?” Malkiel sighed, and Jericho, for the first time, had a thought that maybe Malkiel wasn’t worried about the same thing. He wasn’t worried that Jericho wasn’t okay with it. Malkiel himself wasn’t okay with it. He wanted a child.

Jericho spun against him, back to his front, and brought his arms around. “Malkiel?”

“Hmm?” Malkiel kissed over Jericho’s neck and rested a hand over his navel.

“What do you think? Vize thinks so.”

Malkiel paused for a minute, magic not flowing. Almost hesitantly, he opened himself to share with Jericho and pulled away, a sob caught in his throat before he tightened his grasp around Jericho. “You’re serious?”

“Mm-hmm.” Jericho grinned up at Malkiel and yelped as he carried him to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

“I just... I can’t. Jericho.” Malkiel peppered kisses over his lips as they orbited the sink and dressed, brushing teeth and hair, or in Malkiel’s case, a lack thereof. Bald did *not* suit him.

“I love you, you know?” Jericho kissed him sweetly and Malkiel scooped him up, carrying him to bed.

“I love you, too.”

“You’re not going to let me walk for a while, are you?” Jericho chuckled.

“No. You need to rest, to eat well, to stay warm. To be protected.” Malkiel wrapped them both in the bed’s quilt and crowded Jericho with a hand to his belly, magic flowing, offering what he could only assume was energy, life, or health.

“What does the doctor think about me getting warmed internally, hmm? I want to show my mate my gratitude.” Jericho’s skin prickled in a soft glow.

“A thousand kisses, a thousand’s thousand, even, won’t be enough for you. And now we get to share love and family, and even add to it.” Malkiel took Jericho to bed and kept him *very* warm all night.

Chapter Seventeen

Malkiel

Malkiel had seen to dozens of births in his time acting as a physician to demon aristocracy and more before that. And in all cases, he noticed that morning sickness was very common and fretfully so, but Jericho? He seemed to take to pregnancy like Vize did, his cheeks glowing as his lap grew a little smaller every day. His laptop didn't complain, but Cora did. And of all things, Jericho yearned for sky. He craved it more than any food, wanted sun on his wings and warm rays, constantly.

"We sure there's not an egg in there, love? You're incubating nicely," Malkiel said as he strode out onto the deck where Jericho lay in his shorts and nothing else, sunning himself. Vize lay on his front nearby, arms folded, enjoying the sun similarly himself. It'd been so long since Malkiel basked, but what really startled him was Robin laying on a towel on the deck while Lucifer occupied the third lounge, letting his golden wings out, one shading a basket nearby, where a very quiet Ella stared out at the world with silvery eyes. Occasionally she swiped a hand up, her little sharp nails outstretched and determined to nab a handful of feathers.

The low swell of Jericho's belly didn't seem outwardly pregnant, more or less pudgy at this point. At a month in, he seemed to be enjoying the experience of creating life. He smirked as if he knew something Malkiel didn't but wriggled his hips and settled in happily all the same.

“Luce. Robin. Nice to see you two.” Malkiel glanced around and earned a finger from Lucifer and a polite wave from Robin. His shimmering wings, like starling feathers, an oil-slick sheen glimmering as he folded them politely.

“Good to see you, Malkiel. Xander is with Malacoda and Cass today touring the location for the school and interviewing teachers, so I thought I’d hang out with the fam.” Robin grinned and his smile, bright and open as it was, spread like wildfire. It was hard not to smile around Robin.

“You get your boon from Rachael?” Malkiel lifted a brow and Robin chuckled.

“I did. She said we should just relax and take our time, and that once Xander was a little more independent, we’d have another at the perfect time.” Robin sighed. “Gem is another story all together though.”

Malkiel raised a brow. “Really?”

“Robin!” Vize flitted his wings angrily.

“Oops? Cat’s out of the bag?” Robin snickered.

“As the resident physician, it’s probably best I know anyway. How far is he?” Malkiel scooted over to kneel by Jericho’s side.

“Two days. Girl.” Lucifer pulled Ella from the basket to lay on his chest, her head resting against him, with merely a coo of contentment.

Malkiel snickered. Jericho did not, but he did glance over at Malkiel sympathetically. “Angels just have to wait until the babe is formed enough to have a feel.” Malkiel leaned down to kiss Jericho’s belly and chuckled. “Though I’d not be opposed

to the scenario for boys, yes?” Malkiel wagged a brow at Jericho who batted him away, laughing.

“Gem showed up at our place at six in the fucken’ morning, and thirty seconds into a rant about Falcalor dribbling on the toilet seat and why he deserved to have coffee thrown at him for it and he realized.” Robin chuckled. “Kir and Zaya were a little scared though.”

“Speaking of, where are they?” Malkiel glanced around, hearing a distinct lack of shouting.

“Puppy patrol,” Vize muttered. A collective groan spread out, and Malkiel sighed. “It’s getting about snack time. Want me to take care of that while you keep sunning?”

“Please.” Vize looped his braid over his eyes and sighed contentedly.

Malkiel stepped into the house and wandered the halls, making his way to the den. A strange static in the air made him bristle. Magic, not fallen magic. As Malkiel neared the room, a blank-faced male stood in the doorway, watching the children. It took Malkiel a second to place him. *Leramin*.

“Leramin?” Malkiel’s first instinct was to attack, but the children seemed fine. He turned his gaze toward Malkiel and the silver in his eyes nearly burned, and foul intent poured off of him.

“Malkiel. I’ve come to have a word with you.” It was only then that Malkiel caught Cora’s flickering eyes and realized they all knew he was there but were being very still and quiet, shivering with fear.

“Well, let’s have this word away from the—”

“Abominations,” Leramin finished for Malkiel.

“Children. Let’s go outside. And the children will stay put and be quiet, yes?” Malkiel stared Cora down and she nodded, grabbing Moon’s hand tight.

Leramin didn’t seem too happy about being told what to do but amicably led the way toward the front door, where the scent of destroyed magic and ruined wards floated about. Leramin had destroyed days of work just to make them feel unsafe.

Malkiel closed the door behind them and offered Leramin a seat by his ash tray that he didn’t even so much as acknowledge. “Why are you here?” Malkiel folded his arms and kept his tone civil.

“You’ve come sniffing around Zirriel again, like a dog, a mutt hoping for a scrap of affection.” Leramin’s empty eyes and flat face were everything that he remembered, that emptiness that Zirriel appreciated more than Malkiel’s love.

“I’m not certain what you think transpired in my visit, but I truly had no intentions with her other than following up on some matters for Lucifer.” Malkiel canted his head to stare the angel down, and a twitch in his jaw belied the fury of anger within.

“She said that you needed guidance on a matter. That there was a discarded mate. As if any demon would discard—” Leramin leaned toward Malkiel, teeth clenched.

“Zirriel and I have a history, Leramin, which you know about. When she said she wanted to move on, and told me that you were interested, I gave my blessing because I

acknowledged you were better for her than I. Nothing has changed.” Malkiel reached out to rest a hand on the agitated angel’s shoulder and received a harsh swat to his hand, pushing him back.

“You’ve put ideas in her head and filled her with romance and fancy! Every time your name comes from her mouth, she loses a little more control! And I find her consorting with you!” Leramin grabbed the front of Malkiel’s shirt and slung him onto the front lawn, bringing them out into the open before he unleashed holy fire, striking down upon an unprepared Malkiel.

It didn’t do like demons for them, the burning slower, but Leramin did not have as strong of a fire as Malkiel.

“Hey! Dickhole!” Jericho shouted from the doorway.

“Jericho, stay back. Go back inside. I got this.” Malkiel waved at him as he continued forward, marching with fists balled up.

“What is this?” Leramin stared over at Jericho, his magic bubbling at the surface of his skin, and Malkiel lunged forward, desperate to stop Leramin from attacking Jericho.

Caught off guard, Leramin whipped around, elbow drawn, and crashed into Malkiel’s nose, making him see stars amid the already searing points in his vision.

“J-Jericho! No!” Leramin lashed out, fire tunneling as the scene unfurled before him. Time crawled to a halt and he couldn’t move fast enough. Jericho could withstand holy fire. Couldn’t he? Was he any part demon? Malkiel didn’t have to wonder as the fire crashed into his mate.

Jericho's wings lashed out, folding around him, swatting the fire away inconsequentially as he continued his march up to the bewildered Leramin, eyes wide, mouth agape. Malkiel blanched as Jericho drew his hand back and slapped hard across Leramin's face, making him stagger.

"We have four *terrified* children inside there and a bearer having a panic attack! Happy? And I come out here to find you wanting to start a fight with my mate? No, sir!" Jericho shook his finger in Leramin's face and he stepped back, tripping over Malkiel's legs. Jericho kept advancing though. "And who will we be blaming when they're all afraid of angels, hmm? And why do they have to witness your violence? You know the effect this has on kids?" Jericho lightly kicked at Leramin's shin and he crawled backward, confusion and genuine fear flashing over his face.

"What are you?" Leramin tensed, and some sort of foreign sensation rippled about, like a car backfiring, a pulse of impotence in the air.

"A fuck-mothering seraphim, a pregnant one to boot!" Robin shouted from the porch where Lucifer stood, glaring.

"S-seraphim... B-but..." Leramin wheezed, that pulsing quality interrupting them again.

Malkiel stood and glared at Leramin before reaching for Jericho to hold him. "Don't scare me like that."

"Then don't put yourself in harm's way, asshole. Zaya came running out crying. Kir pissed himself. Cora and Moon won't stop shaking." Malkiel silenced Jericho with a kiss and pulled back to find blood smeared on his face. Malkiel reached for his nose and found it dripping.

“Sorry. Shit!” Malkiel tried to use his sleeve to clean Jericho up and only got swatted away before he lashed a hand out to point at Leramin, who stood crouched on unsteady legs.

“Not a move! I’m not done with you, ass clown. Why are you here?” Jericho shrugged Malkiel off and Malkiel could only stand guard.

“Malkiel... Lucifer’s business into my home... Trying to seduce Zirriel...” The words lamely fell from his lips. “You have a mate? I thought...” Leramin rubbed at his cheek where Jericho had slapped.

“I needed to ask her some questions before I mated him. That’s it. That’s why I was talking to her. If you’re getting jealous and acting out like this, does that mean you’re losing your bond?” Malkiel frowned.

“She wants me to love her like you did! I can’t. I—I—”
Leramin stepped back and Malkiel texted Zirriel.

Come get your mate off Vize’s front lawn, please. He’s got the kids crying.

When Malkiel glanced up, Leramin had twin trails of tears streaking his face. “What the hell...” Malkiel glanced over his shoulder at a rather wide-eyed Lucifer and a rather enthralled Robin, who was one step off getting popcorn.

Zirriel arrived, shimmering on the steps, Nashriel at her side. She patted his shoulder and glanced around at the others. Robin and Lucifer bristled. Hesitating, Robin offered his hand to the little boy, and they politely stepped inside before Zirriel turned the fury of her still gaze onto the situation.

“Leramin. Stand.” Her cool voice sent chills down Malkiel’s spine. That was the sound of a woman scorned, a wife disobeyed, the distant memory of the dreaded *couch* and cold dinners.

“Zir...” Leramin choked, his eyes trailing tears.

“What was done to him?” She blinked down at Leramin, approaching cautiously.

Leramin crawled on his knees to close the distance between him and Zirriel. Her impassive gaze held something of discomfort in it, uncertainty maybe. He wrapped his arms around her waist and muffled a few words that made Malkiel’s brows shoot up.

“It’s gone...” Leramin shuddered. “My power.”

Malkiel tugged Jericho against him and glared down at Leramin. “You’ve stressed out my mate. I was not after Zirriel. You can be assured.”

“Is that what this was all about, my love?” Zirriel patted over Leramin’s head. “Did you think I was unfaithful?”

“You grow apart from me! You spend less time in my bed outside of our rush.” Leramin’s voice had an unsettling wheedling quality to it.

“You don’t seek me out, dear. I’ve only seen Malkiel once in eighty years and even then, I brought Nashriel with me because I trust Malkiel, and I wanted a witness to not be improper. I love you, and it is for you that I continue to breathe. Perhaps I am a little cold and distant...” Zirriel cleared her throat before giving Malkiel a very stern gaze. “But you have to remind me. I don’t know to try. But if you

want me to rustle your feathers acting like this, you've got another think coming. Now, what's this about your power, love?" She patted over him, mothering Leramin, much to his relief.

"I can't shimmer. It's all empty, sucked free. The seraphim did something." Leramin shuddered, and Zirriel tilted his head up to glance over a rather prominent palm print across his face.

"When he did this?" The barely perceptible mirage of a frown flickered over her lips.

Leramin nodded.

Zirriel tilted her head up toward Malkiel and stared at Jericho. "Are you aware of what you've done to him?"

"No. I—I slapped him and it was like a light going out. Pop." Jericho pursed his lips.

Zirriel canted her head, and the frown deepened to a visible one. "Why did you slap him, dear? In your condition, you shouldn't be attacking anyone." Hers was the face of infinite patience.

"He broke the wards on the house, marched in, terrified the children, has Vize in there curled about his daughter crying. Tohu is in there berserked out, and the only thing keeping him from coming out and doing to Leramin what he did to Belial and mounting a wing over his fireplace is that Malkiel and Lucifer promised to handle it." Jericho glared down at the shivering man. "And to top it all off, he hit Malkiel. I couldn't do nothing!"

“Jericho. I’m a fairly strong angel. I could handle this.” Malkiel patted his shoulder. “I simply like to exhaust all my options to deescalate before I result to violence. I’d hate to injure him such that would upset Zirriel.”

Lucifer strolled out, hands in his pockets. He’d found a loose-fitting shirt somewhere and sneered, letting that red glimmer shine over his eyes as he glanced down toward Leramin and rolled his eyes. “Get up.”

Leramin stood, bristling. “Betrayer...”

“You’re an idiot, Leramin. Were you not mated and the father of that sweet little boy, I’d be stomping your ass so far into the dirt, giving Tohu Primoris a shot at you and putting whatever was left into my prison. But I think I know what happened to you.” Lucifer leaned in and tilted his head, sniffing lightly before chuckling, a darkness flashing in his eyes, all a show likely, but it still made Leramin step back.

“Lucifer. I appreciate your leniency and care in this matter. But my mate is pig-headed at the best of times. Please tell.” Zirriel offered him a polite bow.

“He’s drained you. I feel your power coming back ever so slowly, but his magic snatched yours away like candy from a child. And Jericho already has the ability to soften your heart, so look at you, pitiful creature. You’re fallen. Your wings won’t show it. But you’ll know it.” Lucifer snorted. “Stay to your own kind or you’ll darken up. But you’ll always know this pain and have to work to hide it.” Lucifer sucked his teeth, lost in thought, and seemed to make up his mind when he locked eyes with Zirriel. “Two hours.”

“What?” Zirriel blinked.

“Take him home. Pay him some attention, give him a few hours of your heart, and let him recoup. Then you can come take your child back.” Lucifer breathed deeply.

“No! Please don’t... Nash...” Leramin’s expression broke down and Zirriel stiffened.

“I think Lucifer means to offer you some private time to tend to your mate. It’s likely not mandatory, but you two need a bit to gather yourselves.” Malkiel nodded for Zirriel to take the offer, and she glanced back at a rather stone-faced Lucifer to confirm.

“Did I not just say that? You have two hours. Then come retrieve your progeny.” Lucifer sniffed and grabbed for Jericho’s wrist before marching off with him. A wicked grin slashed across his face.

Zirriel gave Malkiel a curt nod before shimmering away with Leramin, and the gravity of what transpired clicked in Malkiel’s mind.

Jericho could cast angels down.

He could make them weak.

Jericho was a real threat to Lucifer and Xander.

Chapter Eighteen

Jericho

Lucifer grabbed onto Jericho's hand and marched back inside with him. The sobbing of children and Vize's sharp, panicked breaths abated, replaced by Tohu's soothing voice and girlish giggles.

Tohu, Vize, the children, and Robin all sat in the den. The girls, for their part, had surrounded Nashriel, cooing and delighted over his fine silvery-blond locks. Kir stood nearby, curious but not such that he wanted to act like he was interested. Nashriel, however, seemed to be enjoying the fawning.

Robin held Ella in his arms and passed her back off to Lucifer the moment he walked in, letting her relax against him, the tension in the room lessening.

"Vize, you alright?" Jericho glanced over, Vize sitting in Tohu's lap, his form large and overbearing but utterly adoring Vize, nuzzling into his back reassuringly.

"I think so. They're gone, right?" Vize squeaked when Tohu grabbed him tighter.

"Yeah. Zirriel will be by later to collect Nashriel." Lucifer nodded to the little boy, who Moon and Kir were bickering over. Kir seemed to think that Nashriel, being a boy, should come play with him. Nashriel didn't appear to care which one but rather would have the fighting end.

“Kids. No fighting. Nashriel, would you like to pick out something to watch?” Jericho used his sweetest voice, but Nashriel only shook his head.

“Hmm...” Jericho pondered for a bit before someone shouted.

Ice cream!

The tangle of children’s screams of joy made Vize tense up in Tohu’s lap, and Jericho sighed. “Okay, the frozen yogurt plain stuff for Kir and Zaya, and birthday cake for everyone else?” Even Nashriel seemed to perk up. “Nashriel, are you allowed to have ice cream?” He pouted and shook his head.

“Why?” Jericho glanced toward Lucifer.

“Mother says I get hyper.” His voice trembled and his little silver eyes glossed over.

“What do you think?” Jericho crossed his arms, waiting for Lucifer to weigh in.

“He can have ice cream. Extra sprinkles, hm?” Lucifer winked at Nashriel, who brightened a little. “And be sure to tell your mom that the devil gave you permission, okay?”

“No secrets?” Nashriel’s eyes widened like little saucers.

Moon piped up, “Pappa said if a grown-up says to make you keep a secret that they’re probably pervs.”

Zaya nodded in agreement.

Robin raised a brow and stifled a laugh. “Whoever taught Xander that ruined my anniversary present for Malacoda.”

They migrated from the den and into the kitchen, a parade of children and nervous adults. The kids had things figured

out, it seemed. Lucifer even dished himself up a bowl and participated in the sundae party with the kids, absolutely spoiling Nashriel with chocolate syrup and sprinkles of four different varieties. Vize never was content with one.

“I want the unicorn sprinkles!” Nashriel bounced and fawned over his bowl with excitement, watching the little pastel heads leave melted trails in his dish. He was a messy eater, but on the other hand, kids his age usually were. Four? Five? Jericho couldn’t really tell.

Malkiel arrived in time to get his bowl and kept himself glued to either Jericho or Vize, floating between the two. Vize, for his part, was far too content, having ice cream, loud children, and a very large Tohu.

After the ice cream came the sugar rush, the kids hyper and running about as they taught Nashriel how to use a foam dart gun. He took to violence fairly quickly, tuckering out from his sugar rush to nap on a couch while the rest of the kids got their blankets.

Zirriel returned not too far into their nap, knocking on the door politely. Malkiel took charge of it and brought her in to grab Nashriel. Vize watched her with narrowed eyes and bristled. She nodded in his direction politely. “I do apologize, Vize, for the intrusion. If there’s any way I can make this up to you, please tell me or Malkiel.”

She hefted the child in her arms and he flopped over sleepily. “Nashriel, did you have fun?”

“Mm-hmm. Devil gave me ice cream.” Nashriel nuzzled into her shoulder.

Zirriel gave Lucifer a wary stare before nodding appreciatively and shimmering.

“Everyone okay?” Malkiel glanced around, brow furrowed.

“Splendid. Aside from Vize. You okay there?” Lucifer paused. “Vize?”

Vize had his face buried in Tohu’s neck, nuzzling affectionately. He looked up, blinking and clueless.

“Yeah, he’s fine.” Lucifer rolled his eyes. “But the bigger issue is Jericho.”

“I know! You b-slapped an angel to his knees so hard he cried.” Robin perked up.

That caught Vize’s attention. He glanced over, blinking.

“Brooooo!” Robin cackled. “He threatened to come get you, Tohu.”

“Robin, really. Show some respect and tact in this situation. So. I reiterate. *What the absolute fuck, Jericho?*” Lucifer sighed with exasperation.

Jericho shrugged. “I don’t know, either! He pissed me off. There were crying kids, and he tried flinging that stupid fire at me. I lost my temper, and I grabbed him and blam! Now my skin is crawling. I don’t like his magic one bit.” Jericho shuddered.

“You have so many uses, you know? You broke him. You broke Malkiel. You’ve done something to me, and I’ve not really gotten how. Jericho, I could probably win against you in

a fight, but you're a person I really don't want to fight with. Truce?" Lucifer stared Jericho down.

"We never had beef to begin with." Jericho blinked in surprise.

"See that it stays that way. For the first time in my history, I've competition." Lucifer cupped Ella to his chest and nodded politely before shimmering off rudely.

"Alright, you two watch the kids. I need to have a moment with my mate." Malkiel nabbed Jericho, scooping him into his arms.

"Malkiel, I'm fine!" Jericho flailed a bit and his heart fluttered, madly in love with the battered angel. The dried blood on his face and grass stains on his clothes seemed inconsequential as Malkiel stormed into their bedroom, closed their door, and crushed him down into the bed, careful of the low swell of his belly. Jericho couldn't protest further, Malkiel's mouth sealing away the noise.

"Don't ever do that again. I've taken my share of beatings. I let my opponent get a few licks in before I unleash. I am not an opponent to be taken lightly. I hold back and reason because violence isn't necessary. I don't enjoy killing. I am a healer, Jericho." Malkiel's voice, coarse and desperate, growled forth and made Jericho shudder, succumbing to another fierce kiss.

Malkiel pulled his lips away, the silver in his eyes glinting. "I protect what is mine. My family is here, is you, and our little boy or girl—"

"Boy."

“Boy. And Cora and Vize and Tohu. Wait...” Malkiel pulled back to stare down at Jericho questioningly.

“Boy,” Jericho muttered, and Malkiel ran his hand down Jericho’s side to cup his belly and feel, trying to confirm what Jericho knew.

“Son...” Malkiel resumed his kisses. “Can you imagine what a good big sister Ducky will be?”

“Sister?”

“If they’re raised together as part of a commune, they are siblings. There are first siblings and second siblings. They will be second siblings, as they are born from the second parents.” Malkiel busied himself with jerking Jericho’s pants down. Unsurprisingly, he was half hard, and the weight of it, plump and warm, reminded him of its presence, and it twitched.

“Malkiel. I—I don’t know why I—I know why I ran out there today. I was angry. I wanted to protect us, and Leramin—instincts kicked in. I couldn’t help it...” Jericho gasped as Malkiel kissed him silent again.

“Bend over the bed, Jericho.” A dark curl in Malkiel’s voice made Jericho shiver and concede, rolling over and sliding to the edge of the bed, ever so careful of his belly. Malkiel pulled his belt free and dropped it on the bed in view of Jericho, and the harried sound of clothing hitting the floor made his cock jerk. “What do I do with you, Jericho? Do you want to be punished for this evening or rewarded? You protected your family, but you disobeyed me and put yourself at risk.”

The unsaid words, *and our baby*. Jericho didn't need to hear them.

"Punish." Jericho relished the word and Malkiel picked the belt up, trailing it over Jericho's back.

Malkiel slid his fingers down Jericho's crease, toying with his slick and opening him up, making his ring soft with aching want.

"Please," Jericho whispered, bowing his back to present more of his ass, to invite the sting of leather.

"Give me your hands." Malkiel helped Jericho to pull his hands back and looped them together with the belt, tightening them with a far-too-quick gesture.

"Wha?" Jericho struggled and stilled, chest and face resting on the bed, belly hanging off, ass raised. His protest was interrupted by the gentle rocking intrusion of a finger feeding into his wetness in search of his spot.

Despite the fact that Malkiel knew where Jericho's spot was and had found it so easily so many times, he circled it, missed it, and touched far too lightly, driving Jericho into whimpers of protest.

"Do you want me to fuck you?" Malkiel leaned down, cupping his hand gently to Jericho's belly, the other propping him up enough to avoid pressure on Jericho's back.

"Please."

"You know what I wanted?" Malkiel growled.

"Wh-what?" Jericho's pitiable mewl made his body tremble.

“My mate, to not risk his life. For my mate to stay safe and protect the rest of our family.” Malkiel trailed his lips over Jericho’s shoulder and bit sharply, making Jericho’s body sing with glorious want.

“Malkiel...” Jericho whimpered again and arched his back, angling his hips to get some sort of friction on his cock from his squeezing thighs.

Malkiel kissed his way down Jericho’s back, to the dip of his spine, over his tailbone, and blew softly over Jericho’s slickness before leaning in and spreading his cheeks.

“Oh fuck.” Jericho choked on his groan and cringed, pleasure sharp and delicious as Malkiel’s tongue writhed against his hole, teasing him so lightly on the edge of pleasure.

“I need.” Jericho panted, the sensations drawing his muscles into tight spasms that made his cock jerk as the taut ligaments reflexively twitched.

“And you can wait. I needed you to stay safe.” Malkiel let his tongue wander, doing more to drive Jericho insane than bringing him closer to the release he craved. Not having Malkiel inside him was a special kind of torture.

“I’m sorry!” Jericho’s voice cracked, a sob caught in the announcement. “S-sorry. I promise. Not again. You are my protector.”

“I am your *guardian*. That is what I was born with the task of in my mind. When protecting someone, I am stronger than any other. Leramin is a child of two powers, a born thing. The reason why Zirriel didn’t fight or bear her weight against me, and the reason she scorned him was because she knew had

I put a tenth of my power into it, I would have destroyed him.” Malkiel leaned over and bit Jericho’s cheek, his flat teeth making his entire body curl and shudder as ample precum drooled in thick strings.

“I promise. Malkiel... Please.” Jericho couldn’t keep the pained want out of his voice, his insides aching in desperate pain to be filled.

“You said you wanted punishment.” Malkiel rose slowly and tugged at the belt, loosening it so Jericho could brace his arms in time for him to throw his weight into a punishing grind of his bare cock.

“Fucking damnit, Malkiel. I need. I’m punished. If you don’t fuck me, I’m going to—” Jericho couldn’t finish the sentence, pure pleasure coursing through him as Malkiel speared into his body with a damning stroke.

“Going to what, exactly, my seraphim?” Malkiel growled, his breath ragged and desperate, as if the secret to his fear and anger was fucking the bitterness away. And as Jericho’s deepest core tightened, heat rushing through him, tingling down his spine, careening ninety miles an hour toward the brick wall of his release, Malkiel reached around to squeeze his cock and draw him back.

Jericho cried out, sobbing as he reached for handfuls of their blanket, twisting it in his grasp as Malkiel rode him hard, striking his spot with punishing force.

“What if I stopped? What if I pulled out?” Malkiel slowed his hips and Jericho sobbed into the blanket, pleading.

“Don’t. Please. I need you, Malkiel,” Jericho cried out as his breath went thin and throat clenched. His haggard breaths jerked to Malkiel’s pace, quickening with each progressively faster thrust.

“Feel this need. How much you want it? That’s how much my heart wants you, and you nearly denied me.” Malkiel rolled his hips in a perfect way, grinding his cockhead to Jericho’s bundle of nerves.

His squeeze of Jericho’s cock turned into a zealous stroke then another, pumping to his rocking rhythm, as if permitting him to find his release. Jericho arched his back and came in hard, heavy streaks over the side of the bed and the top sheet as Malkiel’s knot filled out.

He slowed his pace, working Jericho down in the most tender of ways, ignoring his own release. Despite this, Jericho relished that slick and warm sensation of cum pouring deep into him, the pulsing at his ring of muscle. As Jericho’s heart settled, Malkiel massaged into his lower back, rolling his thumbs until he could part, sliding free with a careless dribble.

“Malkiel...” Jericho’s whimper barely squeaked from his lips.

Wordlessly, Malkiel scooped Jericho into his arms and toted him to the shower, silencing every word with a kiss, scrubbing and inspecting his body from head to toe, pecking worshiping kisses until he grumbled with satisfaction. “Not a scratch. You feel good, our little one is well, and I’ve calmed down. But don’t do that thing with stripping the magic again too soon. We don’t know what the long-term effects are.

Okay?” Malkiel kissed along Jericho’s neck and pulled him from the shower, drying him as carefully as he bathed him.

“I promise.” Jericho nuzzled into Malkiel’s chest affectionately and yawned, humming with delight as he helped him dress and tuck into some clean sheets for a nap.

“I can’t lose you.” Malkiel kissed his temple and threw on some clothes before slipping out.

Chapter Nineteen

Malkiel

Jericho sat, legs folded beneath him, watching Malkiel and Vize flit about the room next door to Malkiel's, what had been a guest room at one time.

Cora sat by Jericho, watching the corner of the room warily where a giant stuffed unicorn with enormous black eyes stared soullessly out.

“You sure you don't want your unicorn back?” Jericho eyed the thing.

“Tohu and Ducky never liked it, but it's so cute!” Vize fawned over the creature for a moment, but Cora and Jericho made uneasy eye contact.

“I hid him in my closet.” Cora's soft whisper had Jericho chuckling.

Tohu strolled in, half grinning. “Welcome to sleepless kn—fucking hell!” Tohu jolted, eyes trained on the thing in the corner. “I thought we got ri—donated that to Moon...”

“So that's why Simon brought it back.” Vize glared at Tohu. “What does everyone have against Timothy?”

“Timothy?” Malkiel furrowed his brow.

“That's what Da named it.” Cora shuddered.

Vize grabbed the thing and squeezed it, glancing over at Jericho. “You think it's cute, right? Jericho? Malkiel?”

Jericho and Malkiel exchanged wary glances before Vize sighed heavily. “We just can’t win, can we, Timothy?” Vize grabbed the stuffed unicorn under his arm and went elsewhere, leaving the room in a slump with Tohu trailing delicately behind.

Almost as if sensing the thing gone, their little boy took a moment to flip around in Jericho’s belly, doing a little pre-birth calisthenics, since he probably grew more cramped by the day. “Oof!”

Cora glanced over and prodded Jericho’s belly. “Is he still swimmin’ in there?”

“He’s doing something in there.” Jericho chuckled and gasped when his little boy, sensing Cora’s touch, kicked out.

“Hey! No hitting!” Cora pulled back and pouted. “I don’t think he likes me.”

“I think he loves you. He gets excited every time you’re around.” Jericho beamed and Malkiel sighed, watching Jericho hold his belly, as eager to be over with the whole ordeal as he was to meet his little boy.

“And when there’s cake after dinner,” Malkiel chuckled and Jericho perked up.

“Cake?” Cora and Jericho brightened at the same time.

“Mhm. A nice red velvet with cream cheese frosting. I smelled Luna working on it earlier.” Malkiel plucked Cora up to dance around the room with her as he surveyed the nursery again. Jericho would be due any day. “Now we have to think of a good name for the baby.”

Malkiel swung Cora around in a playful dip, letting her laughter brighten the room.

“Cake!” Cora announced.

“Noooo. We’re not naming him cake. Nobody’s going to nibble on my baby.” Jericho laughed and stood, with some effort, following them to the kitchen. Hopefully Vize had gotten rid of the unicorn in the meantime.

Tiny cries perked Jericho’s ears, and the sting that settled across his chest could only mean one thing. *Ella*.

When they entered the kitchen, Lucifer sat at the table clutching the horrific unicorn while Ella cried at it.

“Stop, it’s scaring her!” Jericho swept over and took Ella into his arms for a gentle cuddle. She settled down in only a few breaths, turning her face away from the monstrosity.

“How can that be scary?” Vize gestured toward it, and Lucifer seemed to agree with Vize.

“The fact that Luce thinks it’s cute should have been your first sign, Vize.” Malkiel gave Vize his best deadpan stare.

“Fine! I’ll re-home him.” Vize sighed, and Lucifer eyed the sinister thing and cleared his throat.

“I have other children, the seconds. They might enjoy such a thing.” Lucifer glanced up, staring at Jericho and Ella for a lingering second. “Perhaps.”

Malkiel had a feeling that Lucifer would be claiming that one for himself, but he said nothing.

“Speaking of other children. Has Abaddon been by lately?” Lucifer still hadn’t relinquished the doll.

“Stops by every night or three for dinner, drags Xander with him sometimes.” Vize spoke up and delighted when Luna passed through the kitchen a few times to the seldom-used dining room to set the table. With Lucifer there, there wasn’t enough room at their table.

“Speak of the devil,” Malkiel said as the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Abaddon let himself in the front door, and Malkiel turned to glance down the hall, surprised to see Rachael at his side with Xander in tow, arms folded behind his back like the young prince he was, surveying his kingdom.

Lucifer stood to greet his son, an almost fond expression dashing across his face. Lucifer’s newfound openness had made Abaddon fairly uncomfortable. Though, at first sight of the creature in Lucifer’s arms, he stumbled back, making a very unmanly sound, shrieking so loudly that Jericho jumped and snorted with laughter.

“What? Why is everyone so terrified of this doll?” Lucifer held it out and Abaddon stared at it warily.

“Father, are you sure that isn’t cursed or something?” Abaddon didn’t reach out to poke it, but Malkiel had the distinct feeling that if he had a stick, he would have.

Jericho’s thighs twisted together, and he bent forward, choking on laughter. “F-fuck, gonna piss myself. Malkiel!” Jericho snickered and waved Malkiel down, reaching for his hand.

“Don’t get stuck!” Vize called out.

“Vize, that was just you. Jericho hasn’t gotten stuck once.” Malkiel patted Jericho on the back, trying to calm his

laughter.

The laughter halted abruptly as Jericho bent forward, clutching at Malkiel's arm.

“Uncle Jericho peed himself!” Cora announced.

Malkiel glanced down and Jericho whimpered.

“D-did not...” Dark wetness soaked his pants and spread.

“Told you,” Rachael sighed as she waved for Cora to follow her. Cora whined and hopped down before following Rachael off to the den. Malkiel had higher priorities than dinner.

“Thank you for the heads-up, Miss Pitch,” Luna called out as she petered about.

“N-no fair. Wanted cake.” Jericho hissed a soft breath between his teeth and whimpered when Malkiel scooped him up, making their way to the bedroom.

Malkiel had been ready for the event for over a week, waiting for something terrible to happen.

“Right on time, huh?” Jericho panted as Malkiel helped him out of his clothes.

“Right about so. I think Vize is more excited than we are.” Malkiel ran his hand over the taut surface of Jericho's belly as he'd done a hundred times before, from the moment he knew until that moment. Their son would be there soon, and the family they'd created would grow a little more.

“I don't want to jinx it.” Jericho chuckled. “But you've never seen an angel die from birth, right?”

“Nor demon. There are complications that can happen but nothing life-threatening. The worst I’ve seen was a cambion and imp couple. Babies too big caused some tearing, and it was just a good idea for them not to have more.” Malkiel made a soothing noise and pulled their towels and old blanket on, helping Jericho to lie back. Most males liked to birth squatting, but lying back was an option. Life found a way, usually, but Jericho seemed so composed and sure of himself.

Malkiel found himself pacing, glancing over at Jericho as he breathed through a contraction.

“Take a deep breath. Come over here. Baby isn’t coming in the next fifteen minutes.” Jericho patted the side of the bed and breathed with practiced effort, all the things Malkiel had walked him through.

Malkiel sat and a soft knock rattled the door before Simon slipped in. “We doing duck themes again?”

“Anything with ducks on it, Cora’s going to steal.” Jericho laughed as best he could, absolutely gorgeous and his soul shining, even though he was in the midst of something painful.

“Hmm. What theme did you end up choosing for the nursery? I know you were weighing a few things.” Simon stepped into the bathroom to wash his hands and joined Malkiel.

“No ducks, but yes, birds. We have a whole little flock painted on the wall.” Jericho’s smile and sweet, coppery-blue eyes made Malkiel’s heart ache.

Simon nodded. “And now we play the waiting game and see if he screams like Lucifer or Vize.”

“Bet you I do.” Jericho laughed.

Malkiel and Simon stared at him, Simon bearing an eerily doubtful gaze.

“Well, you know you have the option. That’s the important part.” Simon patted Jericho’s knee, making him wince a little.

“So I heard something about getting ice chips or something? Is that a thing?” Jericho frowned. “Or some cake chips. That’d be great.”

Malkiel chuckled, unable to contain the love in his heart as a soft glow traced his skin, drawing Simon’s attention.

“I know it only means you’re happy, but more often than not...” Simon took a polite step away from Malkiel as Jericho joined in the laugh before wincing and grabbing onto Malkiel’s hand, breathing through a contraction. His belly drew up tight into his pelvis, muscles twisting.

“Simon, go get him some ice.” Malkiel shook his head and Simon obeyed, stepping out, also likely keeping the rest of them informed.

The contraction rode through with minimal incident until Simon returned, a coffee mug in hand full of the pelleted ice from Vize’s fridge. Jericho had taken to the crunchy things in his final weeks and still appeared to be no different as he chomped down on the aerated pellets when Malkiel spooned them in.

Chapter Twenty

Jericho

Seriously? Was it too much to ask for a little theatrics, drama, or difficulty? Jericho sucked down a spoon full of crisp ice and let the metallic sensation of it flood his tongue and throat, distracting him through the hollow sensation riding his body. It was much like being a metal barrel; each contraction a vice crumpling it a little more like the hollow reverberations of a large stick traveled the surface of him.

A foreign stretching and moving sensation brought Jericho into the moment with spectacular clarity. “Oh... Oh fuck. Malkiel! He moved!” Jericho sat up a bit and Malkiel’s hand slipped someplace delicate, declaring him not quite ready to push.

“It’s alright, he’s descending. You’re so beautiful and strong, you know?” Malkiel leaned in, grasping Jericho’s hand, squeezing back with equal strength as he pressed their foreheads together. And there he stayed and like the surface of a pond, Jericho’s magic rippled, Malkiel’s swimming through it, like fireflies in the night or koi in a pond. And with every flick of a fin and twitch of a wing rose beautiful sensations that made Jericho *hungry* in the same way that his anger made him, the change since he’d come into his form.

Memories of what he’d done to Leramin flashed through his mind as the heated pressure returned once more, and their little one seemed happy to ride the motion lower. He regretted that. He really did. Leramin’s power had come back, but

something about being powerless and stricken had brought the angel to the same precipice that Malkiel had stood on so long ago, but this time Zirriel tried. And little Nash, as curious and rambunctious as any angel child was permitted to be, knew a special kind of affection that his siblings before would never know. And something of a spark had lit between him and Cora, a strange sort of friendship that made the boy the willing target of all her whims. Puppy love or kinship, Jericho didn't know, but Nashriel would grow up happy.

A sharp and searing pain drew through Jericho's belly, drawing down into his pelvis, tearing him down his center, and that power that mingled with his own suddenly rushed forth, sending Malkiel tumbling off the side of the bed with a shout.

"Malkiel?" Simon stepped over him to fret over Jericho, taking over the hand-holding and inspected him in his most indignant situation as Malkiel staggered to his feet.

"Fucking hell, he did the power-zapping thing... Father's graces, this feels *awful*." Malkiel worked his jaw and sniffed about before scratching at his arms.

"I'm sure he's very sorry, Malkiel, but are you up to helping?" Simon tensed against Jericho, and that zapping sensation seemed to backfire against Simon's touch, his demonic power not compatible with Jericho's draw.

"I don't think it works on me, but damn if that feels gross." Simon shuddered and reached a hand to Jericho's upper back to settle him.

"Th-think I feel b-better right now, asshat?" Jericho hissed through his teeth before pushing through a burning sensation,

the sensation that drew him closer with each breath to holding his little boy.

“You still okay with Vize being here, still, love?” Malkiel patted Jericho’s knee warily, wincing before rubbing at his arms, as if his taken power made him cold.

“What’s one more person staring at my taint?” Jericho laughed through a lull in contractions and winced, panting heavily. Simon nodded Malkiel off, but Vize must have been waiting nearby, his eyes misty and posture tense but his expression that of delight.

“Don’t touch him, he’s giving the Leramin treatment and Malkiel’s sapped.” Simon gave up his seat to Malkiel to let him sit with Jericho once more, lips peppering small kisses over his forehead, as if kisses would solve the weight of pain ripping through him. Vize took a moment to wash up and grab a towel, waiting patiently for his turn to be the first to hold their child.

“Simon, you’re good on power, right?” Vize furrowed his brow, weighing his options, and approached.

“Yeah. I got the healing part. I’m warning you, it feels awful.” Simon focused on Vize as the burn and sting stretched into a small eternity.

Vize leaned down, the towel cupped in his arms, his face a mask of absolute wonder and joy, and it somehow overshadowed the pain as Vize’s glow brightened to an apex and a sudden rush of fluid and emptiness left Jericho limp and somehow *less* than he was moments before. He closed his eyes, a second brightness in the room, *Malkiel*, shining

through his lids, even as the foreign sensation prickled Jericho's skin.

"Should have brought sunglasses, sheesh." Simon brought his healing powers over Jericho, and Vize busied himself with Malkiel to tend to their newborn as the first hacking coughs of life brought forth the cries of joy.

"He's beautiful." Malkiel brought the child around, presenting him to Jericho. "Wow, he looks like me..."

With his hair stuck up at every odd angle and face so impassive, it was undeniable. His hair had a wispy pale color, likely blond, an impossible color for human genetics but a plausibility considering what Jericho and Malkiel were.

Jericho accepted the bundle and stared at the child with wonder. For a moment, Jericho glanced between the baby and Malkiel. He could definitely see the permanent cowlick was congenital, but Jericho frowned.

"What's wrong?" Malkiel knelt at the side of the bed, cradling their baby's head.

"Malkiel. He does *not* look like you. Not at all." Jericho huffed a soft breath of laughter that stung less than it should as Vize joined in the healing.

"Oh, come on." Malkiel frowned.

"Malkiel. He looks like a sea creature out of its shell. Let's give him a few days to dry out before we go comparing him to either of us." Simon and Vize snorted with tittering laughter that brought a smile to Malkiel's face as his cheeks pinkened to match his glow.

“I love you so much. Both of you.” Malkiel kissed Jericho’s forehead and then the babe’s and stood, trembling from loss of power or emotion. In either case, tears streaked down his cheeks, tears of abject happiness.

“Love you, too. Now, let’s get some clothes on me and bring in the horde to see the baby before he has dinner. Besides, we still have to pick a name.” Jericho traced his finger with wonder over the baby’s face, his son. This was the very thing he was meant for, to love, be loved, and create loving life with his mate.

Malkiel helped him into a shirt and very loose pants, his motions as tender and careful as any he’d use with a patient but full of a love that Jericho didn’t think he deserved.

Malacoda and Xander were the first to come in, Robin sauntering leisurely at their side, as always, such a prideful expression on his face. *Smug*. It suited him.

Xander, never very enthusiastic at the best of times, rushed forward, his sharp smile wide and eyes bright.

“Easy there. I see that look in your eyes, mister.” Robin propped his hands on his hips and Xander glanced over his shoulder at Robin, pouting. Xander never pouted, and for him to kowtow to Robin so easily was a shocking thing.

“But I know his name!” Xander’s bottom lip trembled.

“Let’s hear him out, hmm?” Jericho smiled and everyone else casually gathered in. Even Abaddon and Lucifer.

“Israfil!” Xander’s sharp grin turned into something of Robin’s smugness.

Lucifer choked and Malkiel snorted.

“Nope! We are not!” Lucifer gave Xander a look that the little boy returned with equal venom.

“How about we modernize it a little, hm?” Malkiel helped Jericho to lean their son so Xander could see him better, and Rachael held her chin up, posture stiffening. This must have been something very official.

Xander stared up at Malkiel for a lingering moment.
“Maybe.”

“Rafael?” Malkiel offered. He’d known a Raphael once upon a time, Israfil, Israfael before that. He’d not made it out of the Renaissance, and though he held no emotional ties to Malkiel, the name held power, and for a tulpa? Power was everything.

“That sounds okay.” Xander nodded sagely.

“Jericho?” Malkiel glanced up, and Jericho held a certain *rightness* in his heart over the name.

“Rafael it is.” Jericho stared at their fair-haired child and he opened his eyes, pale in the way that all angel children were, but they bore that slight hint of blueness that was sure to favor Jericho’s eyes. Malkiel’s soft gaze morphed into absolute joy and love that Jericho couldn’t look away from.

“Are you happy, Xander?” Lucifer’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes, Grandpa. If I’m a prince, I have to have my advisors and he’s gonna be scary.” Xander’s little grin lit his face up in the most angelic of ways. More and more, Jericho came to realize just how little difference existed between angels and demons. Angels, as it was, were only one kind of being, a breed of the same kind.

“Rachael?” Jericho conferred with the imp and she nodded, her eyes aglow with her scientia powers. Xander watched her response with bated breath and sighed in relief. He trusted her, and Jericho could see how Lucifer’s plan unfolded. A new generation of power was coming.

He hardly noticed when everyone milled about, greeting the baby and leaving quietly. The whole world seemed less important than the little one in his arms. Jericho loved Rafael with all of his heart, so much so that it scared him that he might love Malkiel a little less. But when Vize helped him sit up to feed, pulling his shirt away, helping him latch, he knew he could love so much more.

“I used to know the first, Raf.” Vize snickered. “He would be *so* pissed. I approve.”

“From chaos, the seeds of discord are sewn. Let them grow.” Lucifer sat in the corner of the room, Ella curled to his chest contentedly.

“As you will it, my lord.” Jericho nodded.

“And so shall I will it, so shall it be. Tis the plight of a demiurge.” Lucifer grinned and stared down at Ella. “I can do a lot, and my magic can touch many, but not me, not my own blood.”

“And that’s why we’re so important?” Malkiel grinned.

Lucifer huffed and ignored him.

“Didn’t see Simon come back,” Jericho noted.

“Yeah. He’s seeing to business for me. I’d be on it myself, but he’s taken a personal interest.” Lucifer crossed his legs.

“I hope all is well.” Jericho nodded.

“I think it will be, not yet. Did Rachael seem a little low to you?” Lucifer narrowed his eyes, staring off into space, lost in thought.

Abaddon made a sweep down the hall, surprising everyone when he stopped in the doorway, phone in hand.

“Sorry to bother, but Simon sent me a bunch of photos and I can’t get them to download. He says it’s urgent.” He frowned at his phone. “Sent me a link to a whole folder, and it’s password protected.” Abaddon growled at the device, easily frustrated with technology.

“Is it his cloudbank account through Firstlight?” Lucifer perked up.

“Yeah.”

Lucifer sighed, a small grin twisting the corner of his mouth. “Oh. Try *Fuck you, Walter.*”

About the Author

Lilo Quie spends her day moving between her home lab and recording studios working as a voice actress and consumer goods formulation chemist. Her foray into writing began as a curiosity, much like the eclectic mass of hobbies and inventions in her garage, just to see if she could, and there she found her new passion.

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