



A witch with the gift of earth.
A demon bred in deception.
An immortal world on the brink.

TERRENE

the Immortal Coven series

AMARA RAE

5. TERRENE

THE IMMORTAL COVEN SERIES

AMARA RAE

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*For the readers who love demon book boyfriends. This one's
for you.*

CONTENTS

Note for Readers

Chapter 1

Cassandra

Chapter 2

Cassandra

Chapter 3

Cassandra

Chapter 4

Raziel

Chapter 5

Cassandra

Chapter 6

Raziel

Chapter 7

Cassandra

Chapter 8

Raziel

Chapter 9

Cassandra

Chapter 10

Raziel

Chapter 11

Raziel

Chapter 12

Cassandra

Chapter 13

Raziel

Chapter 14

Cassandra

Chapter 15

Cassandra

Chapter 16

Raziel

Chapter 17

Cassandra

Chapter 18

Raziel

Chapter 19

Raziel

Chapter 20

Cassandra

Chapter 21

Raziel

Chapter 22

Cassandra

Chapter 23

Cassandra

Chapter 24

Raziel

Chapter 25

Cassandra

Chapter 26

Raziel

Chapter 27

Cassandra

Chapter 28

Cassandra

Chapter 29

Raziel

Chapter 30

Cassandra

Chapter 31

Cassandra

Chapter 32

Cassandra

Chapter 33

Raziel

Chapter 34

Cassandra

Chapter 35

Raziel

Chapter 36

Cassandra

Epilogue

Evangeline

Terms

Also by Amara

About the Author

NOTE FOR READERS

This story includes scenes of a sexual nature, explicit language, and violence. Both main characters are victims of abuse, including physical and sexual violence.

Cassandra is on a personal journey in *Terrene* and spends most of the book away from her coven while she explores her relationship with herself and her relationship with Raziel.

Attention: This book deals with themes of trauma and self-loathing. Cass also contends with self-disgust and feeling betrayed by her body because it “responded” when she was raped. This was my experience with sexual violence. No matter the circumstances, the victim is *never* at fault. I know this, even as, in my personal situation, it was hard to believe for a very long time because my body “betrayed” me... or at least, that’s what I thought it did. It didn’t. It responded to stimuli. *Nothing* absolves a rapist.

To anyone who’s experienced abuse, you are loved.

As a paranormal romance reader and daughter of a practicing Wiccan, I took inspiration from familiar concepts about witches and witchcraft, but most of the world is completely made up (or mixed up) and was developed as the characters developed in my mind. Some conventions “felt” right for these characters. For example, they refer to “magic” when discussing one particular gift and “magicks” when discussing multiple gifts. This book is in no way meant to represent the beliefs, customs and practices of historical or modern witches.

CHAPTER I

CASSANDRA

*B*lood blood blood.
Blood.

Blood.

Blood.

“Cass, what’re you doing in here?”

I jerked, my eyes unfocused for a bit before latching onto Greer’s face only inches from mine.

My gaze snagged on the furrow between her brows, dropped to her curious hazel eyes.

Sitting up in the plush armchair, I threaded my shaky hands together under the table. “What?” I rasped.

Her lips twisted, and she tilted her head as if to examine me from another angle. “I asked... what are you doing here all by yourself?” She dragged out each word, giving me time to clear my head of the shadows that fell over me when I least expected.

“Reading,” I mumbled.

A long pause. “There’s barely any light.”

I glanced around the library. It was a relatively small room, with four floor-to-ceiling bookcases stuffed with texts on witch history and law. I sat at one of two long tables, each with six overstuffed chairs. I always gravitated to the one I occupied—it was in the dimmest, least visited part of the library, the far-right corner where there were no shelves and, therefore, no reason for anyone to bother me.

And why would they?

Today, my coven sisters were supposed to train the dozen or so witches who’d reached immortal maturity in the last few months.

So young. The mournful thought tugged at my heart, and I suppressed a grimace.

In general, witches became immortal between eighteen and twenty. They had so much to learn, so many dangers awaiting them, dangers our coven was supposed to prepare them for. It was the duty of Head Covens to ensure all minor coven witches in their territory learned their powers.

Eva and Colette would train the witches with cyclical powers—life and death magicks.

The rest of my coven trained elemental witches... except for me. I never trained a single earth witch. Instead, Greer, Naiya, and Willow took on the task.

Even though earth magic was far different from air, water, and fire.

But Naiya said I didn't need to *worry* about training.

Just another example of your uselessness.

I blinked, beating back my ridiculous self pity. Nai decided what was best for our coven and territory. Acting like a spurned witchling over her decision—a decision I *agreed* with, considering I could barely speak to my coven sisters, females I adored, let alone command a room full of minor witches—wouldn't help anyone.

“Cass... I said there's barely any light.”

Startled, I snapped my eyes to Greer's face before dropping them. “I can still see.” Immortals had far better eyesight than mortals.

“There isn't a book in front of you,” she pointed out, the words tinged with amusement.

My shoulders slumped.

Come up with a better lie next time.

“I went to your room to find you. Makhi and Fin took the witchlings—“

“Younglings,” I interrupted in barely a whisper. “Who knows if they'll have witch powers when they're three-quarters fae.”

Greer huffed, and I shrank further into myself. Why was I inviting conversation?

Your brain is scrambled.

“True,” she drawled. “But I have a feeling Nai’s blood will win out. Besides, we’re all half *other*, but our witch powers are stronger because of it. You and I may be shifters, but our natures don’t diminish our magicks.”

I shrugged.

Greer rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, I went to your room and couldn’t find you. Naiya wants to have a meeting while the *younglings* are out of the house—or, more specifically, the males. Be in the kitchen in five?”

I nodded slowly, and when Greer turned around with a wave and headed for the door, I let myself smile.

My coven sisters were all getting mated, and things had changed for the better around here.

Not for you. Never for you.

I squeezed my eyes shut, flooding my brain with sweet images of Soleil and Aurore, Naiya’s little younglings, to banish the thought.

They looked just like her, which made Finrador, her fae mate, lose it.

Their big, dark blue eyes, black curls, and gummy smiles had inspired a frenzy in the usually laid-back male.

He was determined to protect them, and Colette’s mate, Makhi—who thought it was his duty to protect all the females

of the coven—was right there with him.

They'll have less time to protect you.

I stood and threaded my fingers together.

Good.



“Next on the agenda is freeing June. Any ideas?” Naiya asked. She glanced at me, eyes luminous with worry.

Just before our coven meeting, Nai pulled me aside to *inform* me *Ezekiel* murdered my cousin, Luis.

My father murdered his only nephew, just as he killed my aunt several decades ago.

All the blood relations who loved me were gone.

In a moment of desperation, I once asked why Father didn't kill me. I thought I wanted to die, practically begged him to end my suffering.

As he laughed and told me death was a mercy I didn't deserve, his dark eyes wild, light brown skin mottled with hatred, I realized my will to live outstripped my fear, my capacity to handle pain.

And Luis was one of the reasons.

Ailene, leader of our second coven, had relatives in most of the other territories. She was essentially our spymaster, along with her mate and fellow second coven witch, Solana. After I

reached immortal maturity and left my father's pack, I asked her to have her contacts keep tabs on Luis.

He wanted to depose my father and had a small following among his pack mates... very small.

Over the years, it had barely grown, despite my father's cruelty. Most of the males and females around him were just as depraved. The rest, he cowed into submission.

Back then, I still had hope. A small sliver that didn't die after everything my father did to me, and I should've known it was poison.

Hope only set us up for agony.

Nai's eyes had darkened with worry as she broke the news to me.

I didn't need a mirror to know my face froze at that moment. And when I dropped it to the floor, hiding behind the curtain of my hair, covered by the blessed darkness it provided, Nai's small hand ran over my shoulder before squeezing gently.

Much like hope, grief wasn't worth dwelling on. I tucked mine away in a tiny box and shoved it deep where the rest lay gathering dust.

As much as I loved Naiya, respected her leadership, she seemed to bring me only bad news.

Last night, she told me she and Atticus had spoken, and Raziel would no longer be coming for me.

Only a few months ago, I decided to take back *some* control of my life and make myself useful to my coven. I snuck Atticus' phone number from Nai's cell and called the warlock male.

I felt confident enough that I could trust him. A little less than a year ago, he gave shelter to Colette and her mate, Makhi, when they escaped Makhi's former clan. Every time my coven went to him for aid, he tried to help.

I trusted Colette more than anyone—she was our life witch, our healer, but she was so much more. She gifted us with her generous spirit, nurturing and loving us in a way we'd all lost when our mothers' coven was destroyed.

Colette trusted Atticus because he was the leader of her brother's clan. She trusted Raziel because he was Atticus' friend.

Therefore, I trusted Raziel.

And, for whatever reason, the male was interested in me. Which gave me value *and* power, something I sorely lacked.

So I asked Atticus to put us in contact, and I made Raziel a deal.

I wanted him to help Greer's mate, Aleksandr, who was having... difficulty after Colette saved him by using a demon's soul to heal him, leaving him with a demonic shadow. He went so far as to reject Greer out of fear that shadow would compel him to harm her.

But that wasn't all I asked of the demon male.

I demanded his help to free June, the All-Elemental witch, and our friend. Something that still gave me a little thrill.

I squeezed the phone so tight, it creaked. "And... and you'll help me get June away from the witch Council."

Silence.

A minute of silence as my hand grew damp with nerves, my breathing picking up slightly. Raziel heard. I knew he heard.

Because he laughed, low and deep and insidious, and somehow, it conveyed how much my anxiety pleased him.

But Raziel agreed... if I gave myself to him for a month.

I could do that easily. My body wasn't mine, hadn't been for years. Handing it over to him would be just as easy as lending him a book.

I knew my coven wouldn't be *excited* by the prospect of a demon taking me away, but I thought they'd understand.

It hurt that they didn't.

They wanted to protect me, but in reality, they chipped away at what little power I'd given myself.

And I feared June would pay the price.

"Look, I want to save June as much as any of us, but we have no way around the Elders' new protection spell and no leads. Atticus doesn't have any suggestions. Fin has no clue how to get through it. Nai... your mate is *fae*. They're masters of traveling between realms and spells, and he can't find a way through," Eva grumbled.

Naiya's eyes flashed. "I'm aware."

"So why do we keep running around in circles? We need something new, something we haven't thought of. And since you destroyed the *one* new plan we had..." Eva's gaze fell on me.

"That wasn't *our plan*. Cass went off and did that on her own." Naiya slammed a hand on the table. "What did you expect me to do? Let her go off with a fucking *demon*?"

"It wasn't for you to decide," Eva snapped.

A frisson of warmth inundated me, but the tension in the kitchen quickly suffocated it, and my mind started to detach from my body until I couldn't hear the yelling anymore. I floated in a haze, existing but not, until Colette brushed a palm over my arm.

But it was one of the rare times when my haze provided clarity.

"The deal wasn't with you," I mumbled.

Naiya and Eva were too busy arguing to hear me, but Colette squeezed my hand and asked, "What do you mean?"

"The deal was between me and Raziel." I lifted my face and met her eyes briefly before glancing away. "He'll come for me."

Naiya's eyes brimmed with intensity, her power beaming through and cutting through the kitchen, its light dancing off the dark wood of the table. The space itself was homey, big

enough for a large fridge, sink, dishwasher, a modest number of cupboards bracketing the sink, and a long kitchen table.

She lit the entire place up with her fury, and I sank into the chair, making myself small.

I hated disappointing her.

But I needed to prepare her for the inevitable.

And... maybe prepare myself.

“He won’t come unless he wants to *die horribly*. Atticus promised the deal was off,” she gritted out.

“The deal wasn’t with Atticus,” I whispered. “No matter what he promised, he won’t be able to stop Raziel.”

Her jaw clenched. “Then we’ll guard your room for the foreseeable future.”

Ducking my head, I said no more.

There was no use.

My coven sisters, and especially Naiya, wanted to believe they were in control.

The truth was, the moment our mothers mated other immortals and set us on a collision course with *all* immortals because of our bloodlines, we lost whatever bit of control the Goddess gifted to us.

I just hoped my sisters wouldn’t do anything reckless to save me when Raziel came.

And he would.

I could feel it in the vibration of my bones, in the hairs rising at the back of my neck.

No guard would be able to stop him.

When I went out to the garden with Colette earlier that week so she could spill her life-giving blood to refresh the protection spell tied to the long-lived ash tree, the earth groaned beneath us.

Even as astute as Letty was, she assumed the noise was the wind.

But I knew the truth.

It was a warning.

CHAPTER 2

CASSANDRA

*B*lood blood blood.
Blood.

Blood.

So much blood.

Pictures in blood.

Claws drawing blood.

Blood.

I didn't gasp or jolt awake.

I turned on my side in the fetal position, made sure my head was over the edge of the bed, and threw up all over the floor.

The vomit tasted like blood. Thick, hot, tinge of iron.

I heaved until there was nothing left.

Then I sat up and looked around.

I didn't have to search for long.

I felt him before I stopped spewing the contents of my stomach, like the scrape and slice of blades along my sensitive skin. A dark presence before me, waiting for me to succumb.

So I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, reached for the bottle of water on the small side table by my bed, and chugged it down. Capping the empty bottle, I set it down on the exact same spot on the table, took one deep breath, and faced the male with unearthly blue-black hair, the curls long enough on top to flow over his forehead and obscure a heavy-lidded eye, the other narrowed on me. The male who'd come to collect what was owed to him.

“A deal is a deal, little witch. Are you planning to run? Because I must warn you, I would very much enjoy the chase.”

A shiver worked down my spine, and Raziel smirked. But when his nostrils flared, his full lips thinned.

Was he... scenting my emotions? Greer thought he could read minds... what if this was another way to get inside my mind? Bad enough that my body language betrayed my true feelings.

Every instinct in me screamed *run*.

Well... that wasn't exactly true.

Logic told me to run.

Instinct demanded I... go to him.

And that was far more frightening.

But I was so tired of running. Exhaustion had seeped into my bones until it seemed like it replaced the very marrow inside them.

I shivered, swallowed, and put my fear in a box.

Push it deep.

“I won’t run,” I whispered.

I scooted to the edge of my bed and dropped my legs over, using my feet to search for the flats I’d slipped out of before crawling between the sheets only a few hours before.

I woke from my daily nightmare to see a nightmare made flesh in the corner of my room, right next to my small dresser and the pretty lamp Colette had given me for one of my birthdays.

He took up so much space, his body immense, close to 7’0” tall. He’d tower over my 5’9”.

That was new.

Among witches, I always towered. Only Greer matched me in height, courtesy of our shifter ancestry. But Raziel... he didn’t need to shift to be a beast.

Layers of muscles thickened his arms and chest, leading into a tapered waist and powerful thighs, all of it covered by deceptively casual grey slacks, matching coat, and a crisp, white button-up shirt.

He seemed like a black hole sucking in the dim light until all that was left was the dark.

I could handle the dark. The dark was comfort.

It banished the demons in my mind.

The reminder of the evil in my head had the blessed effect of diminishing the power the living, breathing demon had over my waking fears.

And he noticed immediately, his back straightening, relaxed arms suddenly flexing, showing off the powerful muscles in his frame.

Those muscles could be used to hurt, to break, but how could I be afraid of being broken when I was already shattered?

And why aren't you afraid he'll use them against you?

My mouth went dry.

His dark brown skin set off his even darker eyes, that impenetrable gaze boring into my face, and I had a good idea about what he saw, because I knew exactly how I looked when I felt this way.

Eyes downcast and dull, with my hair limp in front of my face. Baggy clothes unable to cover my curled shoulders, masking my true height.

“Can I bring something?” I asked with barely a stutter. He didn't move, didn't indicate he heard me, only stared.

I figured he wouldn't allow it.

It was hard enough to ask. Unlike me, I suppose, but I was turning over a new leaf, and it felt good to get the words out.

I bet my coven sisters would be proud of me for voicing my wants, even if they went unfulfilled.

And a shaft of pain tried to worm its way into my heart, but I hummed under my breath until it turned into a dull, numb space, just like everything else.

I walked over to Raziel. "I'm ready."

He didn't make a move to whisk me off, so I risked a glance at his face, only making it as far as his chin.

Still, that was an improvement.

"Get what you want, witch," he said gruffly. I pursed my lips, not understanding what he was talking about. Why weren't we off to the demon realm or wherever he wanted to take me? "You asked to bring something. Get it, before I lose my patience."

The words were harsh, and I couldn't stop myself from flinching, curling into myself protectively.

Thick, oppressive silence filled the room. My heart pounded against my ribs, but I scurried to my little end table, opened the drawer, and pulled out my treasure.

"A... book." He didn't ask a question, but it was one, just the same.

I nodded and hugged the ratty notebook to my chest. "Okay... I'm ready."

My room disappeared in a flash of iridescent lights, so beautiful it felt like it must be the realm of the Goddess, and I

smiled.

Because in my heart, I wanted to believe I could be brave like my coven sisters.

And this was the first step to showing myself that was true.

CHAPTER 3

CASSANDRA

Whatever magic Raziel used to take us wherever he did, it dropped me in a room with no windows or doors... by myself.

I figured he wanted to intimidate me by leaving in a cell, but all I felt was relief.

I was *alone*.

For now, I could postpone the inevitable.

Eventually, he'd come for me, and I'd give him what he wanted. That part—the giving of my physical body part—was easy.

My mind dealing with it after the fact... *that*, I wasn't looking forward to.

So I would enjoy my time in the quiet, dim, enclosed cell.

The four walls and no doors or windows gave me a false sense of safety.

I wasn't stupid, though.

Raziel put me here because he could access me here.

Without any trouble.

Setting that thought aside, I rose from my crumpled position on the floor—the same position I'd been in since my awareness returned as his magic left—and forced my shaking legs to take me to the small bed.

I sat down on the edge and took in the bare space.

No frills, no clutter.

Comforting.

I was sure the demon male didn't intend for it to be. Any of my other sisters would be clawing at the walls, looking for an exit.

Except Willow, maybe. She was a simple female.

Naiya had her own issues, and she used to avoid them with all sorts of tasks. Now, she relied more on her mate to see her through the dark moments.

Letty needed company to banish her pain... or, at least, she did before Makhi came into the picture. I bet the warlock treated her invisible wounds like tangible enemies and slayed them for her with a single-minded purpose.

That made me grin, but the moment of happiness disappeared quickly.

I may prefer my own company, prefer the quiet, but that didn't mean I missed my coven sisters any less.

And... I was getting used to their mates, too.

At first, I thought Willow's brutal berserker male, Toric, would be the hardest to be around. He was actually the easiest.

He didn't talk much, didn't press, didn't get in my space. He was huge and violent. He was also the calmest of the males living in our compound, probably because violence was a way of life for his kind, ironically diminishing cruel brutality.

I should've known I'd have the most problems being around Aleksandr, Greer's shifter alpha mate.

Alphas... were a problem for me.

Blood blood bl—

I shook my head and clenched my fists against the vicious memory of the cold concrete floor, of my fingers tracing patterns in blood.

Not the time to fall apart.

I didn't search for weapons. Even if I was good with a blade, I wouldn't be able to take out Raziel with one.

My magic was naturally defensive, and so was my temperament. I could protect myself that way if I needed to.

Then it dawned on me.

I scooted off the bed and got to my knees. Slowly, I lay my body across the floor, stomach down, and spread out my arms. With my cheek pressed to the cement and hands palm down, I closed my eyes and let the earth beneath the structure speak to me.

Earth magic was quite different from the other elemental powers.

Most earth witches could erect barriers of dirt and stone and manipulate plants. I could probably do it, too, if I got out of my head.

That was an impossible task.

But dirt and stone and plants spoke to me, giving me a sense of place. Which is why, after a few moments of lying there, letting the aura of the natural world pulse through me, I realized we were still in the Earth realm, although with a tinge of *other*. Probably from a demon being in residence.

Interesting.

I assumed Raziel would take me to the demon realm. Clearly, he hadn't dampened my magic, so my coven sisters could do locator spells.

Not that those were super accurate, but they'd be enough for my coven to try to "free" me.

I stayed on the floor for several minutes, letting the aura soothe me as it always did. I'd become quite competent with shields because of that connection. Earth witches didn't just manipulate the physical world, they pulled the aura from the Earth and wrapped it around them. As we developed our powers, we could protect others in the vicinity of our shields.

It was a useful gift, especially as a Head Coven witch. I'd had to use it several times in battles, including in the fight

against the demon-possessed warlock clan that kidnapped Colette a year ago.

As part of the clan, Makhi was tasked with breaking Letty, but he fell in love with her. It was impossible not to. She was the kindest, most generous female I'd ever known. She always tried to fix me, take away my pain.

I wished I could rid myself of it so she wouldn't get that defeated look in her eyes every time my neuroses popped up again.

During the battle to take out the clan, I was pretty useless until I found Willow unconscious on the bloody ground.

It was one of my finest moments. I managed to keep my shield up and protect us from the demons and demon-possessed warlocks.

Opening my eyes, I stared at the floor in front of me, another little smile on my face.

“What are you doing, witch?”

There was that silky voice.

I tensed, but I didn't move.

I didn't know what to do, if I was being honest.

Raziel was formidable, and his presence almost overwhelmed my connection with the earth, but...

He didn't leave me with that sharp fear I had become accustomed to.

In his presence, I felt a swirling awareness in the pit of my stomach, a wariness, but not fear.

My beast didn't cower either, and that was the most shocking of all.

It had been trained to freeze and submit.

By me.

Because I didn't trust my beast. My beast demanded my presence in my body, demanded the union of the physical and ephemeral, because beasts embraced what was.

And when I rejected the vessel that housed my beast, that trapped my soul... I had to reject the creature demanding I come to terms with my physical self.

Because I couldn't do that. Not when my body was my greatest enemy.

Now jitters of anxiety crawled over my skin as my beast chose this moment of all moments to not be cowed.

Now... now it stretched and... purred.

It was the most quintessentially shifter reaction I'd ever had to another being. A recognition of a male who was far stronger than us, but whose strength was *impressive* and worthy of admiration.

And my mouth went dry when I realized Raziel made every part of me, even the ones buried deep, ignored, feel unfamiliar. Even when I made our deal, his icy, malevolent voice had the opposite effect than it should have.

He made me feel... calm. Apparently, my beast felt the same.

And I couldn't trust calm.

But I was not only a shifter, and it wasn't only my beast who'd been trained to freeze in the presence of danger.

“Rise, female.”

Gradually, my body unlocked.

Because his words... his words came out perplexed, and it deflated my anxiety.

I raised myself onto my knees, lifting my head enough to catch sight of his legs so I knew I faced the right direction, and I stiffened again.

What now?

My reactions to Raziel were baffling. The emotions that inspired them were *completely* strange, and it made agitation race down my spine even as I conceded those feelings—and the male who brought them forth—*intrigued* me.

He shuffled closer, and I fought to stay still, to not move backward, to not cower as my limbs demanded.

It was a hard habit to break.

I cowered even when I wasn't afraid.

And here I was, using a *demon*, of all creatures, to get over it.

Exposure therapy at its finest. Or worst.

I couldn't stop my lips from pulling into a small smile.

“What amuses you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing,” I murmured.

In a flash, Raziel had his arms wrapped around me, the same kaleidoscope of colors exploding, and the bit of my mind that wasn't frazzled by the experience recognized we were teleporting again.

I shut my eyes, the colors overwhelming to the point I thought they'd burn clean out of the sockets, and I clenched my fingers in the fabric of his shirt.

The last time he did this, it felt like my entire body—limbs, bones, molecules—swirled with the colors, leaving me queasy and exhilarated all at once.

Not this time. Everything happened so fast, my body didn't have time to realize it moved in such an unnatural way. Even warlock portals didn't feel like whatever magic Raziel used to move about. Portals were like walking through a door. Our bodies didn't... disassemble.

“Open your eyes.”

I followed his gravelly instructions. My cheek was pressed into his chest, my hands still fisted in his shirt, and I slowly relaxed my fingers and moved out of his embrace.

Surprisingly, he let me.

Even more surprisingly, my fear was nonexistent.

Agitated by the thought, I turned my head away from him and searched my surroundings.

We were in a formal dining room. Marble floors, an intricately carved dark wood table big enough to seat at least twenty, matching high-backed chairs, a white table runner threaded with gold geometric lines, fine china and even finer wineglasses.

The walls were covered in expensive looking art—not that I'd know the artists, but the whole place was opulent. Even the frames looked to be made with beaten gold and silver.

Ostentatious candles on the table provided dim light.

It looked... romantic.

“Let us eat, pet,” Raziel purred, grasping my elbow and moving me to the seat beside the head of the table, pushing me down into it when my limbs wouldn't cooperate.

I was far too confused by everything that had happened, that I'd seen, and my mind and body were having trouble with basic functions while I processed.

When the impact of his... *name* for me sunk in, sick churned in my gut.

Pet.

A creature for his enjoyment. Something controlled, kept.

He quirked a brow, and I realized my expression must've shifted, exposing my unease.

I ducked my head and, after a pause, he moved away.

Pet. It's good to be a pet. He can use you with no expectations or explanations. Keep you for a month, but never delve beneath the surface.

When I lifted my head and met Raziel's unfathomable gaze, my stomach settled, anxiety evaporating as quickly as it came.

Yes.

Just another mile of distance between us.

He settled into his seat at the head of the table, and a door creaked open to the left of us. A male and female walked through carrying carafes of wine and water.

My jaw dropped.

This was *not* what I expected when I made the deal with Raziel.

I thought he would use my body—something I was prepared for. I never let myself think about the kinds of acts he could inflict on it. I only told myself it couldn't be worse than what all that flesh had already endured.

Even though I knew that wasn't necessarily true. Earth-bound immortals knew little of demons, but what we did know was their incredible capacity to inflict pain.

But this, I didn't expect.

Now, I had to... eat with him?

I sat stiffly in the chair as his servants—by their vibrant violet and gold and green skin, all demons, possibly not powerful enough to glamor—filled the glasses beside our

place settings, and as Raziel sipped his wine and stared at me with his fathomless dark eyes, I dipped my chin and reached for the glass of water.

And watched him from under my lashes the whole time.

I couldn't help it. He was so *arresting*, the most beautiful being I'd ever seen, and even with my penchant to avoid male company, I felt interest flicker over my skin, a sensation I hadn't experienced since before my mother died.

Disconcerting.

Captivating.

He smirked and sipped his wine, but he didn't say a word.

Was this an intimidation tactic? I furrowed my brows and scooted the water closer to me, but I held off on drinking it while I considered the question.

I slid my thumb through the condensation, the cold seeping in everywhere my hand touched, grounding me.

If that was his tactic to intimidate, it was good he didn't know silence was my superpower.

Over the next hour, the table was laden with food. Course after course, and still we sat silently.

Platters of meat I didn't touch—witches didn't usually eat meat, and I didn't crave it unless I was in heat. Thankfully, I wouldn't have to worry about that for another three or so months. My mind couldn't separate from my body, couldn't float away, when I was in heat. Everything was trapped,

crammed together, urgent need binding all my parts together, and I had to be locked up in a room off to the side of my coven's training pit.

I had one free heat after I left my father's pack, and on top of being unable to distance my mind from the experience with my beast hellbent on keeping me trapped during the throes of it, I ended up hunting down local humans.

I was *present* the entire time, my consciousness in the prison of my skull. After it was done, I threw up and screamed and raged. Greer and Eva found me curled up, rocking, visions of blood stoking relentless nausea until bile ate at my stomach lining.

And that wasn't the worst of it.

I nearly killed a human man.

And I destroyed the connection with my beast because of it.

Deep down, I felt betrayed by it. A creature whose soul was born with mine, who was meant to protect me.

The death of trust drove my beast to cower until a heat arose, driving its instincts to the forefront, but I was never free during those times again.

Greer and Eva called Letty to come heal the injured man while Nai watched me like I was a skittish animal.

You were.

Eva wiped the man's memory—another sin on my soul, since the process was so brutal, it traumatized Eva every time

she had to do it—and my coven never spoke of it again.

But I saw my savagery in Letty's gentle, aching eyes, and in her attempts to nurture me.

Eva approached things quite differently.

She wouldn't ever bring it up, but... she was my advocate. The one who believed I was strong.

I showed her my greatest failure, and she thought it could be a weapon.

I didn't blame her for it. We all needed to be useful to the coven, the territory. But she was wrong.

As dinner progressed, the silence became an oppressive weight. I didn't know why his lack of questions, his quiet contemplation of me, disoriented me so much. My ease seeped away, anxiety rising behind it. Normally, I'd be glad for the reprieve from the chatter that flowed around the table at my coven compound. As much as I loved my sisters, the continual meetings and talks and always prodding each other pricked at my nerves. They didn't prod me so much anymore, and I was grateful for that, but being around so many beings at once muddled my brain.

Yet, here I was, growing increasingly tense that all Raziel did was stare. His gaze was heated, intense, but not threatening.

And I would have to explore why he never felt... threatening to me.

Why it was so very easy to make a deal with a demon because of it.

And it shouldn't have been. Not after demons nearly destroyed my coven.

Raziel was havoc to me. It was natural to get used to our idiosyncrasies, bad or good. To find comfort in them. Yet here he was, destroying the familiarity, the comfort silence brought.

Was my reaction because of what he was? Something inside of me, my beast or my witch powers, responding to his presence in some way I hadn't anticipated?

Was it because all of his attention was on me, and I couldn't escape it, so chatter would be preferred to his relentless gaze?

Was it because... he fascinated me?

I would ponder the questions later, when he returned me to my cell.

I picked around the meat on my plate, eating the few vegetables available, while Raziel took a long sip of his wine before setting his goblet down with a thunk.

Apparently, he was done with the silence.

“As you are to be my... guest for the time being, let us converse.”

I swallowed. “About what?”

“Tell me of your coven.”

Discomfort twisted in my stomach—not because of his question voiced as a demand, but because I found myself

wanting to answer him—and my clumsy hands lost control of the silverware. The knife and fork fell to the plate with a loud clatter. Even if my instincts drew me to him, I wouldn't—couldn't—give him information he could use against my sisters.

I grabbed the silverware with trembling fingers, and Raziel smirked.

Was it my clumsiness that amused him?

“No, sweet witch. I am amused because I did not know you could have such a reaction. I did not know that you had any emotions at all.” He leaned forward and tilted his head to the side, an unnatural pose that highlighted how unnatural *he* was. “It pleases me that you do.”

I nibbled my lip. “You can read my mind.”

He leaned back, and his smirk morphed into a wide smile. “Not at all, pet. Your mind is your own.”

Fumbling with my glass—the servants never let it empty throughout dinner, and my stomach was nearly bursting with water—I hid under the curtain of my hair.

But I couldn't resist a peek at my... host.

His brows were lowered, lips in a thin line, but when he caught me looking, his eyes widened a fraction.

And satisfaction lit his face.

When he returned me to my room later that night, I was relieved and disappointed in equal measure.

And I didn't know why a male who made me so uncomfortable, so uncertain, could inspire that response. My quiet ponderings gave me no insight.

I was no closer to understanding the strange pull I felt when he was near.

But all thought fled when he rasped one word. One word was all it took to stall my heart and mind.

“Strip.”

CHAPTER 4

RAZIEL

Cassandra did not know it, but she was made to be mine.
Created for me.

And tonight, I would claim her.

But she could not know what she meant to me, that I spilled rivers of blood to create the spell that found her.

That knowledge would give her far too much power.

And though she was made for me... she was my adversary, the key to victory and destruction wrapped in a delectable package of rich brown skin, small breasts, and wide hips.

Her deep brown eyes... those were an uncharted realm, beautiful and unknowable.

I would learn every corner of that realm soon enough.

What a fascinating creature this female was. The only one—immortal and mortal alike—that I could not read.

I smirked as I remembered her coven sister, Greer, asking if I could read minds during our last encounter.

How simple these Earth-bound immortals were.

Their auras, their impressions, were so easy to decipher. I did not require access to their minds.

But not my sweet, timid female.

No.

I could not read her.

In my careful study of her over dinner, however, I began to learn her ways. The most notable being how she covered her face and eyes, hiding herself.

And it made me want to peel back her layers—clothes first, then skin, muscle, and sinew, until I could examine her bones and see what secrets her Goddess wrote on them.

Perhaps then I would understand.

I would have to settle with making use of her delectable body instead.

“Strip,” I said evenly. I was not looking at her. Best my little pet did not see how she intrigued me.

When I heard no rustling of clothing, I infused my next words with venom. “Strip.”

Now, there were halting shuffles, followed by fabric hitting the floor. Slower than I wanted, but she would learn not to make her master wait.

I shrugged off my coat and folded it in precise motions before settling it over the chair in the left corner of the room. Other than the small bed, the room had no other furnishings.

My pet did not require more than what I gave her.

But I was a generous male, and I selected a room with an adjoined lavatory for my female's convenience.

I had told Atticus as much when I last conversed with the warlock, one of the few males of his kind I respected.

Though his warnings to leave my female alone were *not* appreciated.

“Heed me well, my friend. You do not rule me.”

Tension crackled, so much I sensed it through the phone, but I would not be moved.

“She is Colette's coven sister, Raz.”

I clenched my teeth, trapping the growl rising in my chest. “Noam's sister is not my concern. He is your clan member, not mine.”

“He's your friend.”

Now, the growl slipped past my lips.

Atticus was correct.

Over the months, I had come to... admire the tall, blonde male with uncanny green eyes. The only warlock born of a witch.

Or the only one known of, that is.

But he was not my concern.

“You promised you would leave the coven alone—“

“Only if they did not request my assistance,” I snapped. “She requires it, and it was you who put her in contact with me. Or do you forget yourself?”

Silence.

Then a sigh.

“I didn’t realize she wanted to make a deal with you, Raz. I thought she wanted information,” he gritted out.

A vicious grin split my face. “That is precisely what she wants.”

More silence.

And Atticus rasped, “Stay away from Cassandra. She isn’t for you to play with. She’s... delicate.”

That earned him a disdainful scoff. “She has far more strength than you or her petulant coven sisters believe. But... I shall not harm the witch.”

As the memory threatened to go on, pulling me into a place of doubt, of regret that Atticus took my words as a promise I would leave Cassandra be when I most certainly would *not*, I realized the room had fallen silent.

I cracked my neck and turned around.

The sight before me made my cock rise painfully, eager to rut my submissive witch.

She laid spread on the bed. Her knees bent and opened wide, arms splayed beside her head, face tilted to the side so she did not meet my eyes.

I would not have to train her, and satisfaction heated my blood.

I stalked over to her slowly, planting a knee on the bed, then the other, and still, she did not move.

My first contact with her bare, golden-brown skin was at her thigh, and I slid that hand up to her generous hip, digging my fingers into the giving flesh. My eyes caught on her pert little breasts as my gaze lifted to her face. Dark hair flowed over the bed, long and straight and perfect to hold in my fist as I took her. Her full bow lips were parted, dainty nostrils flaring. But she continued to withhold her wide brown eyes from me.

For now.

A little shiver worked over her, but she let out a whistling breath and settled once again.

I hummed in appreciation as I dragged my free hand over the soft flesh of her calf until it reached the even softer crevice between her thighs.

“You are so very wet for me, pet,” I muttered, brows furrowing. Inhaling deeply, my confusion only grew.

There was no scent of arousal, but her pussy was soaked and ready.

There was... no scent at all.

Once more, I trailed my attention up her stomach to her breasts, perfect handfuls with soft brown nipples. They were not tightened with desire.

Agitation chased pricks down my spine, but I set it aside.

Perhaps I could not detect her scent, as I could not detect her thoughts.

Returning my gaze to her tender pussy, I used my free hand to part the folds and slid my palm over the wet surface, ensuring I caught her little clit each time.

Her hips remained still, even as more wetness covered me.

Gritting my teeth, I pressed a finger against her entrance and pushed.

And sharp, sickening terror blasted across my skin, a hot band tightening around my chest.

I tore the finger out of her and sat back on my haunches to look at Cassandra's face.

The muscles were slack, her full lips parted, but her eyes... her eyes were vacant. Lost. Even as sweat beaded her brow.

It hit me then, like an arrow through my chest.

This female exerted great effort to keep her scent and emotions from me.

And as I glanced over her body, clinically this time, I saw what I had not seen in my state of lust and the glowing victory of having my female in my possession.

Hundreds of shiny, old scars all over her skin.

My heart thudded painfully and sluggishly against my sternum as my vision darkened with fury, and every muscle in my body clenched.

I wanted to decipher her... but these were not the marks, not the story, I expected to find.

Someone harmed my female.

Grievously.

And if her response was a sign, they did far worse than cut her flesh.

The roar built in my throat, snagged in the back of my mouth, but I could not suppress it. I threw back my head and bellowed.

Now, Cassandra moved. Quick as can be, she huddled against the headboard in a tiny ball, her knees pressed against her chest, arms hugging her legs, head tucked in between her knees.

More scars covered her back and ass.

Whoever harmed my female did it when she was not yet immortal.

I staggered to my feet, my throat narrowed until I struggled to suck in air. Rage and disgust slammed into me, my vision wavering. Even as my muscles tensed, my entire body shook.

Who could harm this female in such a way?

Earth-bound immortals were *depraved* if this is how they treated their females. Their younglings.

I growled through sharpening teeth. They nicked my tongue and lip, and still I ground them together until blood pooled in my mouth.

Cassandra tucked into herself even tighter, her entire frame shaking and shivering.

I could not remain here and keep control, and she could not explain in this state.

Clenching my fists, I swept my gaze over her pitiful form one more time, rage beating its drum in my blood as my eyes snagged on each and every scar.

With another bellow of rage, I transported from the room.

CHAPTER 5

CASSANDRA

I'd been alone in the room for a week.

It... surprised me. Raziel and I negotiated for a month where I'd be his to... do what he wanted, and he not only stopped before actually *using* me, but he also had already wasted one-quarter of the time.

The only living being I'd seen was the tall, slim, golden-skinned female who brought me meals twice a day. No more dinners with Raziel eyeing me like he wanted to lay me on the table as one of his courses.

Whenever I tried to speak to the demoness, her lips pinched, she shook her head, and left.

She wouldn't even tell me her name.

I thought, maybe, I'd... done something wrong and displeased Raziel.

He didn't seem to like my scars. Probably had buyer's remorse, thinking he should've had me strip for inspection before making any kind of a deal with me.

I chewed my thumbnail, and my breath hitched.

Would he void the deal?

I shuddered, June's smiling face flashing in my mind, her deep brown eyes alight with mirth, dirty-blond hair tousled, skin flushed with happiness.

Then my mind created pictures of what she could look like after months in the Elders' hands.

Dirty skin, torn clothes, marks of abuse, bloody wounds.

Blood blood bl—

I coughed and squeezed my eyes shut until the memories and images disappeared.

Resolve steeled my spine, and I inhaled deeply before slowly exhaling.

I had to convince Raziel to keep his end of the bargain.

I would do anything he asked. Anything he wanted.

I would... learn to pretend I enjoyed his attentions.

Even if it meant I couldn't escape into my mind. Even if it meant I had to be present as he violated my body.

He was a beautiful male, and in another life, that wouldn't have been difficult.

As a witchling, I had desires. Those seeking, exciting flutters in my core. The wonderment of knowing they could climb and climb, but not yet understanding what waited over the precipice.

I still had desires, but they were tainted by the reality of how something so beautiful and fragile and full of possibility could turn ugly.

Raziel awakened echoes of those flutters, even as his touch dropped me into the void, away from inevitable pain.

I wondered if the changes in my physical and mental responses were because he was so magnetic, or because I was finally exposing myself to someone outside the coven, to a male outside the coven.

Were my fears exaggerated all these years?

Could I overcome them?

These questions floated in my mind, but I didn't have answers to questions I had never believed worth asking before now.

How could I, when I'd hidden away in my dark room or in books, rarely exposing myself to genuine interactions with beings I wasn't used to?

All immortals were compelling to mortals and immortals alike, so it wasn't shocking that I found Raziel to be... attractive, enticing.

I had found many immortals attractive.

Intellectually.

My body's response, the tension, the twisting in my stomach, the lack of fear... all that was new.

I felt like a witchling again, when everything and everyone was new and exciting and strange, and yet, the instinct to fear wasn't yet at the forefront.

And... I yearned for my sisters. Their voices. Their wisdom.

They'd be frantic by now. Desperate to find me.

Eva and Willow would be preparing for war. Naiya calling our allies to join the search, browbeating Atticus for information about Raziel. Greer researching how to find and kill demons. Colette urging Noam to tell us more about the demon his clan leader had befriended.

They wouldn't find anything. I didn't need to know Raziel to know he'd hide his tracks, even from those he trusted.

You're a horrible Head Coven witch. An even worse sister witch. Unworthy. Weak. Tainted.

Tears burned my eyes, and I blinked rapidly to rid myself of them. I hated bringing them pain, making them worry about my wellbeing. Part of me wondered if I was stupid for going through with this, knowing my sister witches would use resources to search for me, resources they needed to protect our territory. But a much bigger part knew, in my soul, that I was the key to saving June. What little Atticus told us about demons made it quite clear. They would never renege on a bet.

And Raziel promised he could save June.

That didn't lessen the band of guilt tightening around my ribs.

I had avoided talking to my coven for so long. Partly because I didn't know what to say. But also... it was too much to say. Sometimes the most difficult part was understanding where to start.

So I never started.

But now, I could really do with their advice.

I felt... lonely. Unexpectedly lonely.

I thought I was the perfect one for this task. Not only because, for whatever reason, Raziel wanted me. Well, at least enough to make a deal with me.

I should have been perfect for this task because I didn't need constant companionship. Because nothing he could do to me could be worse than what had already been done.

In this moment, I could take more than what my sisters even knew I could take.

They protected me for so long without realizing that there was no pain too great for me to handle.

And that was my fault. They didn't know because I didn't tell them. And I didn't tell them because I didn't want them to look at me differently. I didn't want them to have to bear the weight of it, so heavy it sometimes crushed my lungs and caved my stomach with agony.

It was silly, really. We all had pain to carry. I knew none of them would thank me for keeping my secrets, but didn't we all have secrets? Didn't we keep some of our pain to ourselves?

And maybe, in some sick way... I was possessive of it.

It was mine. Whether good or bad, pleasure or pain, our feelings, our experiences were our own.

And if I told them, they would try to make me look at things differently, to reassess it. In some way, it would become partially theirs.

They would make me to forgive myself. Or they would tell me there was nothing to forgive.

That was the stumbling block. I knew, and had always known, that I failed. I felt it in a way that I could never forgive. The burden of forgiveness was not something I wanted.

Stronger females, females like Colette, could handle that better than me.

But I had to find a way to be better than what I was. To show them I was stronger than what they saw and what they believed. Otherwise, how could I be of use to my coven?

If I was being optimistic, this experience would give me better access to my power, like Willow with the berserkers. She spent several weeks fighting through their trials to gain an audience with the *ferron*, or berserker leader, only to discover it was Toric, her fated mate. And over those weeks of fighting—something the fire witch was exceptional at, and I would know, since she often trained me in the pit—she began harnessing her power in a way she never had. For so many years, control eluded her.

Maybe I needed to go through a trial to harness mine, too.

And if that was the case, I could be an asset to my coven sisters. I could be the sister they deserved.

I couldn't pinpoint what it was, if it was the Goddess, or the earth, or some fanciful dream I had that grew and swelled and breathed itself into a living thing.

But this... this felt like my destiny. Like I was born to be in this place, to go through this test.

I grinned to myself. I wasn't usually one for such notions. But immortal life was full of otherworldly creatures and forces, so who was I to question the impulse?

My mother wouldn't have.

She fit her name. *Jacinta*. Shining light.

Faith sustained her. In the Goddess, in her path, in her coven.

And now she's gone.

What sustains you?

My smile fell, and I scrubbed a hand over my mouth and closed my eyes before they blurred with tears.

She's not gone. None of us ever are.

I often wondered what she'd think of me... but knowing my mother, she'd wrap me in endless hugs.

Then she'd destroy everyone who'd ever slighted me.

I let out a whoosh of air and dropped my head in my hands before tugging at my hair.

Whatever happened at the end of this month, I would've at least proved my coven sisters didn't need to waste their energy always protecting and shielding me.

No matter how many times I tried to tell them, at least in my own way, their impulse was to protect me.

Tingles raced around my neck, memories of my neck getting snapped during the challenge before the Elders not that long ago. Of our adversaries using me to taunt Naiya before a vicious *crack* and peaceful darkness until vertebrae mended.

And when my brain turned back on, visions of the Elders calling out my name for punishment, Greer stepping forward to volunteer in my stead.

Greer hanging from a pole, her arms stretched and bound, as the Elder Council ordered her whipped when it should've been me.

My mouth went dry.

Yes, my coven wasted so much time, expended so much effort, trying to protect me.

So now it was time for me to show them a different path, and the only way to do that was to walk it.

CHAPTER 6

RAZIEL

I was not a male prone to sentimentality.

Demons scratched pitiful existences in the realm of Inferna. Like all immortals, we knew war far better than peace, compounded by living in an inhospitable realm after the angels banished our kind.

My female and I had more in common than she knew.

Angels and demons were once one kind, living peacefully in the realm of Angelus, as warlocks and witches once did on Earth.

Self-righteous pests.

I did not know what divided our kinds, nor did I care. Demons escaped to Inferna at some point eons ago, but even then, the angels would not allow us peace. Not when a sliver of our realms was connected, allowing free entrance to those who dared venture through it.

And according to my mother, many demons tried in the dark days of our separation. Yearning for their home rather than

building a new one.

The angels slaughtered them all.

And now, some demons tested their mettle by venturing into Angelus. Angels did the same in Inferna.

Bloodshed continued. Hatred grew.

Had witches the power of the angels, perhaps they would've banished their male counterparts to an empty, inhospitable realm, as well.

Living such an existence heightened sensation and emotion, all demons just as eager to fuck as to kill, to inflict pain and seek pleasure.

And there was little time for consideration of the means for achieving an end.

Any path to victory was appropriate and just.

But my female... complicated things.

Perhaps I had been on Earth for too long, entrusted with a task I must see through, but having developed a hint of the sentimentality of the soft Earth immortals and even softer humans after millennia among them.

It did not matter, for it would not change my path.

Whatever the case, I would rethink my approach to Cassandra.

Many immortals did not care about their mate's willingness in all matters... including mating itself.

In the dark days of my youth, perhaps I would have been such a male. The thought made me grimace; but Inferna was a place of darkness, of depravity, of *exquisite* pain.

No. Demon mates are rare. Cosseted. Beloved.

Yet, I could not deny some of my kind would abuse such a gift.

But my little pet... no, I would not take from her that which she did not wish to give.

This posed a conundrum. I could not read her. Her emotions eluded me, at least those I had not yet deciphered with my own eyes. I assumed her arousal would thicken the air, that I would know her desire through her thoughts and through the sweetness between her thighs. As that was not the case, and I was not a stupid male, I would find another way to get what I needed from her.

Wrapping myself in shadows, I entered her room, blending into the darkness. She did not know I was present, *could not* unless I chose to expose myself to her, but her face turned to me, nonetheless. Perhaps as drawn to me as I to her, her body understanding what her mind and heart had yet to accept. I observed her as she stared into the corner where I stood. Her plump lips parted with gentle breaths before she ducked her head to obscure her face with her hair.

I believed she did such because her nerves got the better of her, but alone, in her room, she hid behind the curtain of hair as if escaping to another room altogether. I filed the gesture away, as I did all her expressions and slightest movements.

If I could not read her mind, I would read her body.

She told me much, even when she told me nothing at all. Her body spoke, but it did not give me the words I wanted, that it yearned to be filled and seeded and mated.

No matter. It would eventually. With that thought, I blended into the wall and left her.

I had a task to complete.



“I know you’re there, Prince of Deception.”

I grinned, tucking my hands in the pockets of my slacks, and stalked over to the petite half-fae demoness. I’d searched for her for long enough to anticipate this hunt, the sweet burn of it beneath my skin, the heated pleasure of impending violence in my blood.

“Long you have eluded me, female. Now tell me...” I paused, pursing my lips and raising my brows, but by the flaring of her nostrils, she took my façade of ignorance for what it was. “Where is your mate?”

Now, it was her eyes that flared, slitting at the center, not quite like the customary dual-colored eyes of the fae, manifesting only when their emotions were high.

But then again, she was not more than a halfling.

Cassandra’s coven leader had far stronger fae blood than this female, and even she did not have dual-colored eyes.

I rocked back on my heels. “Ah, yes, my trusty servant slaughtered him in the night only days ago.” I stepped closer to her, but I kept my frame relaxed, unthreatening, because I did not need to threaten. Her heart raced, her pupils dilated, and her fingers trembled without any grandstanding at all.

For she knew who stood before her.

My reputation preceded me among my kind.

I saw the flashes of her thoughts, her grief at the loss of her warlock male. Her terror as she realized there would be no escape.

But even with that terror, she squared her shoulders. Her brown hair gleamed in the sunlight. Her arresting turquoise eyes never dropped from my face, and I begrudgingly respected her for it.

“I won’t be party to this, Prince. I know what you seek to do. I cannot stop you, but you are wrong to follow *her*.” She licked her lips and squeezed her hands together, fingers twisting. “You will come to regret it,” she whispered. “You will see the mistakes you’ve made, but it will be too late. So if you want my blood, you’ll have to get it without my help.”

I closed my eyes and inhaled the scent of her terror. Sweet with a hint of spice, it raced to my cock until it strained my zipper. If only I could spend myself in my sweet little witch after taking this female’s head.

Cracking my neck, I lifted my lids and shrugged my shoulders, pulling my now clawed hands from my pockets.

“That will not be a problem,” I purred. “Your blood will join my collection, and your consent is not required.”

As my claws unzipped her flesh, tissue parting, offal splattering on the ground, I retrieved a vial from my pocket and filled it, the dark red fluid glinting with the female’s magic.

All immortal blood had different... properties in spells, different uses.

And I needed the most potent of combinations.

I would have liked to use the blood of each of Cassandra’s coven sisters. Alas, I did not require them. Their combinations were not as intriguing as they believed.

Greer’s mate, the shifter with the demonic shadow, however... *quite* unique.

And I had that prize in my grasp after my last meeting with the witches. What a small price they demanded for it.

The arrogance of youth. They knew not the value of their own essence as of yet. If they lived long enough, perhaps they would.

I could have absconded with Cassandra while they traveled to me that day. Over half the coven away from their territory, their protection spell unable to keep me out. When they returned home, they would find her gone, having paid my blood price and lost their earth witch in one moment of strategic stupidity.

But I wanted Cassandra willing.

She had to be willing.

Though, at the time, I did not believe it would be so difficult to mate her.

When I returned to my home, I bellowed for the servants to clean up the blood dripping onto the floor, a trail of it following in my wake. They swarmed behind me, several as I entered the large, well-appointed lavatory in my chamber, just like the well-behaved pests they were. I stripped quickly; the blood-soaked garments dropped to the floor, and I stepped into the shower. The lukewarm water washed away the evidence of my activities for the evening, but the halfling's words lingered in my mind.

I did not question my queen.

I could not question my queen.

But the very existence of my mate, my little pet, made me feel... ill at ease.

I could not have my loyalty split.

So I would have to increase my efforts to get the little witch to capitulate.

Otherwise, I would have to become a male I did not want to be.

For I would get what I needed from her. I would enjoy it.

And if she couldn't enjoy it as well... so be it.

CHAPTER 7

CASSANDRA

“**Y**our reprieve will soon end, female. I *will* take what is owed to me.”

His voice always felt like silk skimming across my skin, followed quickly by razor blades. Deceptively beautiful, always full of a painful promise.

Eight days, he left me alone. Eight days for me to start to... slowly yearn for his company. I had eight days of being utterly perplexed by this development.

Who am I? What has he done to me? How could he possibly alter me in such a short time with so little interaction? Is this just my desperate desire to feel... normal?

I immediately rejected the last question.

I never much considered being *normal*, only useful. There was no use in feeling irrationally comforted by a demon's presence and attention.

Relief slumped my shoulders and eased my pounding heart.

If he intended to collect, that meant the deal was still on. June would be safe soon.

He crossed his thick arms, bringing me out of my thoughts, my attention drawn to his formidable form.

He had a façade of calm, but this male's aura was chaotic.

My magic didn't reject him as unnatural, didn't give me any bad vibes, so that was something.

His brows lowered, and he frowned.

And I realized I hadn't responded.

I cleared my throat. "D-did I do something to displease you?" I asked softly.

Now his brows rose to his hairline, his mouth dropped.

Why was he so much more expressive in this place? Was he comfortable enough in his own home that he didn't care that I saw his thoughts?

Maybe we were both different here, isolated from our kinds.

I'd never met him before he came for me, only spoke to him over the phone to make the deal, but my coven sisters said he was extremely hard to read.

Except I could read his confusion clear as day.

"Displease me," he muttered.

I lowered my chin. "You stopped."

He growled low, and I curled in on myself, raising my knees to my chest in an instinctive response.

“I stopped because I do not fuck *corpses*.”

I couldn't stop the flinch, my head jerking back, eyes slitting in embarrassment. “I'm sorry.” The words came out barely above a whisper, and if anything, it seemed to make him angrier. He stepped forward aggressively before coming to an abrupt halt when I flinched again.

“Explain to me why your pussy gushed for me, but it was as though your soul fled your body.”

I swallowed hard and raised my shoulders to my ears to make myself even smaller.

This was not what I expected from him. Why did he care whether I was *present* when I willingly gave him my body?

But... I didn't see a reason to lie.

“Can... can I have your word you won't speak of this with my coven sisters, or anyone who would tell them?” I asked haltingly, a tendril of pride that I, once again, voiced my wants to a male who could tear me asunder.

Even if I shivered when he glared.

“Of course I won't speak a word to your *coven* or Atticus' clan. I know no one else who engages with your coven, nor do I care to. Now *explain*,” he gritted out.

I picked at my nails for a moment, staring at my hands, but I couldn't think of a reason this needed to stay a secret to Raziel. What did it matter if he knew, at least a little bit?

I didn't have to tell him anything of importance.

And maybe if I answered the questions he had, he would take his payment, and he would save June sooner.

But I didn't really know where to start.

"I..." I twisted my lips in a grimace. "My mother was murdered. By... a traitor in her coven."

Raziel moved toward me sinuously. He was so graceful, fluid, for a male of his size. He took a seat at the edge of the bed but left plenty of room between us, so I didn't feel smothered by his towering frame.

It was a bit disconcerting that he seemed to sense my unease, my indecision, when it came to him.

"Pet..." I flinched, and he arched a brow before continuing. "All immortals living on Earth know what happened to your mother. That one of her coven betrayed her, blooding another Head Coven so that they would be able to enter your protection spell. They launched a surprise attack on your home. They slaughtered the five loyal witches, including your mother. And then your Elder witches scattered you and your sisters to the wind." He raised a brow. "I have been in this realm long enough to hear the atrocity whispered in fearful tones. And in approving ones by those who believe your mothers—and *you*, along with all hybrids—should be eradicated."

I smiled without humor, a tense thinning of my lips. "They didn't exactly scatter us to the wind. They sent us... five of us weren't immortal yet. We needed guardians. The Elders... Made a deal that allowed Willow to stay in our territory with

Colette and Noam. Letty was the only one of us who had gone through immortal maturity.”

“Ah, yes,” he drawled. “Noam’s sister.”

I swallowed. Of course, I knew Raziel was close to Noam’s clan leader. Atticus was the person who got us in contact with the demon in the first place. From everything I knew, he was an honorable male, especially for a warlock. He compromised, allowing Noam to become part of his clan while still maintaining a relationship with his witch sister, even though our kinds had centuries of animosity between us.

“Yes. His sister. Then there were four of us who were sent to our fathers.”

“The faeling went with her father? And Eva, the siren? Did she go to her *angel* father?” I didn’t miss the venom in his tone.

These were questions I didn’t want to answer, not because I thought they would give him anything of use, but the less he knew about my sisters, the better. I shook my head, refusing to answer.

He dipped his chin in acknowledgment, his lips quirked as if I amused him. “And you?”

I sucked in a breath. What was I thinking, trying to have this conversation with the demon? The demon who wanted to fuck me? The demon I had sold my body to?

“You were sent to your father.”

I shrugged.

“And he was not kind.”

That ripped a snort from me, and I jerked back, surprised at the sarcastic sound.

Raziel’s eyes glimmered, showing their mirror-like qualities. I knew demons had that feature, but this was the first time I’d seen it on his already otherworldly face. A shiver of awareness went down my spine.

“He was not kind,” he repeated slowly, the words gruff.

“No... he wasn’t kind,” I muttered, looking at him beneath my lashes. “He... enjoyed punishing me.”

And I realized I had miscalculated.

I had no read on Raziel. I had observed him, or at least observed my confusing responses to him, but I had not taken the time to read him.

Not that I was great at that, and maybe my survival instincts were extremely poor, especially with my beast hiding in my subconscious, never making its demands known unless my heat was full on.

The aura of danger around this male could kill on its own if he so wanted.

All the hairs on my body stood at attention, and goosebumps followed in their path. My breathing went shallow, and even without the beast guiding my more animalistic instincts, I felt them rise. *Flee. Fight. Freeze.*

And as I watched the predator in front of me, for all his languid posture, his lazily crossed legs, his loose arms, the insolent smirk on his face, I was looking at a killer.

A remorseless one.

One who reveled in it.

Spots danced in my vision in response to my rising terror, I saw his... façade flicker, the hint of horns coming into focus, their shadow above his head, and for some reason, the look of violence stamped across his face dropped my heart rate, eased my breathing, cowed my fear.

Because that violence, that rage, wasn't for me.

It was for my father.

And I hadn't even told him everything. Not about the... *violations*.

He knew as much as my sisters. Which, granted, was enough for them to hide me away, protect me from myself.

But Raziel didn't care about me, so this response was completely unexpected.

And I didn't have a chance to tell him everything. His energy overwhelmed all else.

Terror turned to an insidious thrill that wove the path from my heart to just behind my navel, pooling in my core.

If I was another female, I would say it was arousal.

But for me, that sensation... was more.

It was everything.

It was *safety*.

But before I could say a word, before I could even get a grasp on this jarring transformation, he disappeared.

CHAPTER 8

RAZIEL

My female was harmed by her sire.
My female was harmed by her sire.

I shifted to shadow and moved through the wall, traveling quickly in my ephemeral form until I reached the attic where I kept my implements of torture and any *unwelcome guests*. As I crossed through the door, I began to reform my physical body slowly, hoping to calm my fury before I took on my full form.

It did not work.

Throwing back my head, I roared to the rafters, grabbing a table full of blades and chains, lifting the heavy metal frame, swinging around in a semicircle, and hurling it at the opposite wall.

Unsatisfied, I did the same for the other table laden with implements, smashing grooves in the wall as the needles and saws and pliers rained down with a clatter.

My chest heaved, my shoulders shook, and I clenched and unclenched my fists.

Nothing eased my rage.

All I could see were the many white scars decorating my female's flesh.

And now... now I knew they were placed there by the male who should have cared for her.

I roared again, this time until my throat was hoarse.

I needed to expend this energy.

Perhaps I would find a female to fuck it into. Or several.

Because... because I could not fuck my mate as I had planned. Not with the knowledge of those marks, the evidence of her pain.

Not when she shrank into herself, as if to avoid more punishment she did not deserve.

How could I do what was needed of me?

I could *not* fail.

I ran my fingers through my hair and paced.

Coming to a halt at the far wall, I cracked my neck, closed my eyes, and breathed.

Memories bombarded me, crushing me under their weight.

My brother, Kaaen—Prince of Chaos—as a youngling, facing my mother's whip for speaking out of turn.

Of that whip cracking on my flesh when I stepped in front of Kaaen, the burn as the coils split skin, so many marks that

the flowing blood became a balm over them. The smell of leather and sweat and blood.

The acrid scent of terror.

My brother's wild yellow eyes as he cowered in a corner and soiled himself.

The sensation as I soiled myself. And pain. Always pain.

Our sister, Princess of Lust, a female who deserved no name, sliding into our beds, testing her wiles on her brothers not yet through maturity.

Not for pleasure, no.

Never that.

For control. To instill fear and self-loathing.

My mother's pride when she succeeded.

I swallowed bile before inhaling through my nose and cracking my neck.

Pulling my power around me, I disappeared into shadow, floating from room to room, letting the feel of it calm me.

I did not look in on Cassandra.

I could not, for she was death to my control.

When I felt confident in my calm, I reformed myself in the back garden.

Trees of varying shades, greens and tinges of orange and brown as the seasons turned, alighting the leaves.

Flowers and vegetables teeming in chaotic formation. The ground was full of life.

Even demons enjoyed beauty.

I inhaled deeply, taking in the sweet and earthy smells, reminded of my female as I stood surrounded by all that grew... all that was Cassandra's kingdom.

And I knew I would find a way to get what I needed from her.

I would not damage such a prize, no matter what my queen expected of me.

A demon did not damage their mate.

Not I.

My monarch could demand it, and perhaps I could find a way to do what she demanded, but I would not.

I was no longer the youngling who soiled himself as she rained agony upon him, and my loyalty to my kind need not—*would* not—entail giving such pain to Cassandra.

I would... woo her instead.

CHAPTER 9

CASSANDRA

I didn't expect Raziel to take me outside the house.
Not that I would run away from him.

I laughed wryly to myself, drawing his disconcerting eyes, his head tilt making the blue in his blue-black hair gleam.

I wasn't much of a runner, anyway, and I definitely wasn't stupid enough to run from a demon I had made a bargain with.

But, apparently, he had an "errand," and he wanted me to come with him.

It was an abrupt change, considering our meeting the day before ended with him vanishing before I could explain what he claimed he wanted to know.

In my solitude, regret and anxiety curdled inside me.

Not because I spoke.

No.

Because I wanted to say *more*.

I didn't let myself care about the whys. It was too much of a relief, the simple prospect of speaking words to someone who would respond by... by wanting to destroy.

Was it wrong for me to project my internal destruction outward? To have a male do it for me?

Probably.

But that was just harmless fantasizing... right?

A strong male, one without my moral compass or fears, annihilating everything and everyone that ever hurt me.

After the extremity of his response, I'd keep my secrets to myself unless it seemed like honesty would get him to free June sooner.

That didn't stop me from lying in bed, images of my father and his enforcers and everyone who ever stood by while—

Well, it didn't stop me from smiling at the thought of someone else's blood spilling for a change.

Maybe being in proximity to a demon changed me in some way. Maybe it awakened the violence threaded in the soul of all immortals, the knowledge that we were strong enough to enforce might as right.

Even if that went against what I believed.

That made me think of my coven sisters, and my lips twitched. But with Raziel's hot gaze on me, I made sure the smile didn't fully develop.

But as he wrapped me in his arms and did his little teleporting act, I thought of my coven. None of them believed might equaled right, but they certainly believed strength should be used to correct wrongs and to protect those they loved. Even if that meant scorching the earth and those upon it.

Even Letty would be willing to kill without remorse if any of us were threatened.

So if being around Raziel opened that door hiding the darkness within me... I'd be in good company.

The shadows swirled, brushing along my skin, caressing and cold. I could've asked him what magic it was, but what would be the point? It wasn't like I'd be with him for very long.

But... it would be good information for your coven.

Shit. I hated the voice in my head sometimes.

I'd have to work up the courage to ask Raziel questions, and I'd pray to the Goddess he didn't get angry about it.

Could I stroke his ego to make him more amenable? I could see that as Eva's tactic.

Willow would demand.

Naiya would scold.

Letty would cajole in the nicest way possible.

Greer would probably stare at him and start laying out her theories until he jumped in to correct her.

But... what was my skill?

Barely talking. Being alone and moping.

Yeah, I was sorely under prepared for this.

Then again, I hadn't even considered this to be a fact-finding mission. I just wanted to save June.

That's why my coven sisters were so much better at being witches and immortals and part of a Head Coven. Even Letty thought more strategically than I did, and all of them had the coven's interests at the forefront of their minds.

I had our interests in my heart.

And there was a difference. A *big* one. Logic versus emotion.

But Raziel... wanted me.

So, somehow, I needed to figure out how to use my head.

I could do that. I used my head when I hid in the library. I'd read all the books in that room over the years.

Sometimes, if Greer was being extra chatty with me, I'd contribute my thoughts on her theories about how witches evolved and why our kind split with warlocks and other things we had no way of figuring out. Over the years, we'd spent hours interpreting the Known Laws, the rules governing witchkind. We speculated about what the Unknown Laws contained from the hints of lost texts imbedded in the Known Laws. We debated what caused the Great Bloodletting, the event over one thousand years ago that destroyed so many

witch texts and made witches living in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East flee to the Americas, where they joined with covens with indigenous human ancestry.

It was Greer's favorite pastime, and I tried to give my sisters bones occasionally.

They always wanted to draw me into conversations so I didn't feel excluded, and I loved them for it, but the selfish part of me also, kind of... hated them for it.

As I swallowed around the lump of guilt, my pace faltered so much Raziel grabbed me above the elbow to drag me back onto the path toward the enormous Victorian-style home two dozen feet in front of us.

I didn't ask any questions, and he didn't give anything away, but now that we were approaching this mysterious building, I wished I spoke up.

If I was one of my coven sisters, I'd be haranguing him right about now. Or, I would at least be trying to get away from him the moment he let me outside... but he wasn't a dumb male. Before we left my room, he put an enchantment on me that prevented me from escaping. Well, one that meant he'd be able to find me anywhere, at any time.

That's what he said, at least. Maybe I was a coward, but I wasn't in the mood to test his honesty.

I did manage to ask if he'd take it off at the conclusion of our deal, a boldness that pleased me and surprised him. His eyes had widened slightly, and their dark depths sparkled,

almost like he was proud. Then, in a low, husky voice, he said he would remove it when he no longer needed it.

That sent nerves skittering through me, not that I could do anything about them. Raziel didn't seem like the type to lie, not outright, but he *did* seem like the type to manipulate words, to hide the truth in vague statements, leaving himself as much room as possible to maneuver to his own ends.

That was a concern for another day.

He strode ahead of me and lifted a hand. The door swung open on its own accord, and I jolted in surprise—*another demonic power*—but he gripped my elbow and dragged me through the entryway. It looked like we were in a royal court, with demons with bright orange and green and lavender skin taking up sentry on either side, creating a funnel for us to walk through until we landed at another door. They stood with their arms behind their backs, eyes vacant.

If anything confirmed Raziel was someone important, this strange greeting did.

I should've asked him far more questions, ones I never even considered. Like... where on the demon hierarchy was he?

What *was* the demon hierarchy?

It's amazing what living a life of fear will do to someone. My intimate relationship with it, with pain, made what would've been justifiable fear in this situation not materialize. Maybe because Raziel had never hurt me, had never even

attempted to hurt me. Maybe my internal gauge for it was broken.

Anxiety made my stomach lurch and extremities tingle, but fear didn't make me freeze like cowering prey.

And anxiety was a welcome improvement.

We had rushed through the gauntlet of demon sentries, and I'd barely seen anything at the house, but what I did looked empty, abandoned. Spotless. The room we entered now, though, was filthy.

Excrement, red and brown stains, chains dangling from the ceiling, and now the fear started to trickle in.

My breathing turned to raspy pants, and my vision wavered. Sweat coated my forehead, my upper lip, my palms slippery as I clenched them into fists.

“Calm, pet.”

Pet.

I started hyperventilating, his face blurring as my vision faded, and Raziel cursed.

Right before I passed out, silk enclosed around me, followed by blessed darkness.

The first deep breath I took burned my throat, but the second was near ecstasy.

As my heart rate calmed, my eyes sharpened. Soft fabric filled my clenched hands, and I licked my dry lips when I realized I clung to Raziel.

Somehow, he'd covered me, and a little shudder rocked me.

He figured out the dark was my calm.

And he gave it to me.

"I'm okay," I said, but the words came out weak and hoarse.

Beneath my palm, his chest vibrated with a low, soothing rumble.

"Calm."

I probably should've questioned why his voice, that deep, authoritative resonance, immediately eased me, but I was too grateful I wasn't going to pass out in some sort of demon torture chamber.

"No harm will come to you while you're in my care," he muttered.

His tone rang true, but the room I stood in didn't lend itself to confidence.

The dark cover slipped away, and my jaw dropped in awe.

Wings.

Raziel had wings... and he had wrapped them around me. I'd been tucked inside those magnificent wings—at least ten feet tall, multi-hued and feathered—and that, for whatever reason, felt incredibly intimate.

Before I could catalog all the colors, the wings sucked into his back and disappeared.

He huffed in amusement, touched the bottom of my chin, and closed my mouth. "You may explore them... *later.*"

Reality slammed into me, and I swiveled my head around the room.

We weren't alone.

Someone hung from the ceiling, and Raziel's focus lasered in on the male.

He released my elbow and stepped forward, facing the beaten male suspended in chains, blood seeping from too many wounds to count, his head lowered, shoulders shaking with his rapid breaths.

I swallowed hard, grateful that I rarely spewed at the sight of gore.

That was one benefit to having seen so much of it.

A rattle built in Raziel's chest, and when he spoke, the blood in my veins turned to ice. "You've been accused of possessing humans without the consent of your queen, your princes, or your princess. As you are currently in a human vessel, there is no need to confess, for the evidence is before me. You will receive your punishment immediately."

The demon in chains stiffened as I did.

Raziel's tone was soft, even.

Menacing like a cold chill that made it hard to breathe as it burned the lungs.

The command dripping from each word locked me in place, my heart beating sluggishly as I watched his brought back flex when he rolled his shoulders.

The imprisoned male made to speak, but Raziel had his trachea ripped out in the next second, blood and gore splattering.

Some sprayed in my direction, one droplet hitting the crook of my thumb, and I looked at it curiously.

My jaw dropped as Raziel faced me, his lips thinned and eyes searching.

I could see it in his expression. He thought I would retreat. He thought this would drive me into my shell, into my daze.

And a little smile tipped the corners of my mouth.

I didn't fear punishment.

I didn't fear justice.

I didn't fear violence.

Context. Context was everything.

And the blood on me wasn't mine, so I had nothing to fear.

"You're... an enforcer of sorts?" I asked softly.

Raziel sucked in a breath, then his lush mouth shifted into a wide smile. "You are not afraid."

Bashfully, I ducked my head. "Only if I was the one in chains."

He stepped toward me, ever graceful. I could see his feet, wide and long and decked in fancy loafers, as he approached. *With his sense of style, he'd probably get along with Makhi.* And that made me grin, teeth showing and everything.

Gripping my chin, he lifted my head, scanning my face, gaze lingering on my silly smile. His eyes darkened. “Beautiful,” he muttered, and my mouth dropped open. Objectively, immortals were all beautiful and compelling, so that wasn’t a shock. But the feeling behind the words, the husky tone, the way each syllable curled over his tongue, made me tremble. “You have nothing to fear. No harm will come to you. A demon keeps their vow.” The vehemence was a punch to the chest, and now I was the one to suck in a breath of surprise.

He voiced what I already knew. That wasn’t what shocked me. It was the heat in his eyes, the sense that... I was *his* to protect.

And the unexpected relief that came with that thought.

CHAPTER 10

RAZIEL

I grumbled to myself as I checked the vials of blood once again.

My collection was incomplete... and to complete it, I would damage something pure.

She was a creature forged in beauty and pain, far stronger than she or her pathetic coven realized...

But Cassandra was damaged in ways I had yet to untangle, and however this mess was resolved, I would invariably damage her further.

I had come to learn something about my female. She eschewed others because crowds of immortals or mortals triggered something within her.

She did not fight, nor did she run, as most creatures would in such circumstances.

She froze. She drifted away to a place within her head, a place I could not follow, for I could not read her.

But it was apparent in her glazed eyes, slackened facial muscles, and limp frame whenever it happened.

I should have mated her the moment I brought her to this place, before I had time to develop a fucking conscience. Instead of making her strip, wanting the show, the gift of her body being unveiled for me for the first time, I should have torn a hole in her pants and plunged deep.

That time had passed.

It was good I was an adaptable male.

Now, I would do something I had never done.

Earn a female's trust.

I grimaced as I returned the vial of berserker blood to its rightful place on the rack situated upon my desk, leaning back in my chair, and running a palm down my face in exasperation.

The memory of how I'd acquired it eased my discomfort and reminded me of what I was.

A demon prince of great power. A male with a task beyond my desires.

A chime bounced off the walls, filling the room with its grating demand, and I stiffened and grumbled to myself.

With a long sigh, I rose from the plush seat behind my desk and moved to the shelves recessed into the wall. I pulled open the panel, exposing the beaten metal bowl with old blood pooled at the bottom, bubbling every so often.

I dipped a finger in it and swirled before bringing it to my lips, tasting it to receive the message from my queen... my *mother*.

My lip curled in disgust even as resignation beat in my chest.

I shut my eyes and released a huff of irritation. Unsurprisingly, she wanted to know what the delay with my mate was now that I had acquired her.

The queen had been stuck in Inferna for far too long... without a mate, detached from the customs of our people. As we all had.

I had been among the Earth immortals for far too long, and it unleashed instincts in me that demons in Inferna had lost.

I did not begrudge them. Severing of traditions was abominable, but it was quite difficult to keep them alive when you were scraping to survive.

I needed to acquire my mate, and having her physically present was not enough.

The queen wanted me to claim her, but she did not understand the spells. I could not complete the mating without Cassandra's consent. Certainly, immortals could make claims without their mate's consent... a shifter male marking and knotting a female did not require her agreement, although those pests were honorable in that regard, revering their mates. They did not tend to take what was not willingly given.

The fae could mark, and they did take whether or not their mate desired such a union.

But demons mated with intention. Cassandra's intention mattered as much as my own. I could claim her on my end, shove my cock inside her pussy, spend inside her and let my barbs lock us together, making her mine forevermore.

My cock throbbed at the thought, saliva pooling in my mouth as my teeth sharpened, ready to bite her, to *bleed* her, to taste her essence in every way.

I clenched my fists and cracked my neck.

Her claim on me was what mattered.

I inhaled deeply, grasped the ceremonial dagger beside the bowl, pricked my finger, closed my eyes, and squeezed droplets of blood into the dish. Once several drops landed in the liquid, I swirled the cut finger around in it, and the message was sent.

The queen would know I had almost all the parts required for my task. She would know I had made progress with my female.

She would not know that I could not do what she had asked.

But even so, it was a reminder of my purpose. And having a renewed purpose gave me direction that I found myself lacking in the presence of my mate.

I had taken her to witness demon justice just the day before, thinking it would endear her to me.

I was right and wrong. She seemed curious, but Cassandra did not ask questions. She was not a female who spoke her mind. I would have to... draw things out of her to gain trust.

But the smile she gifted me... exquisite.

Divots formed in her cheeks, her skin flushing darker, deep brown eyes glimmering in a way I had never seen.

She was perfection.

That smile alone was a victory far greater than I had expected. She gave me her beauty, and soon, she would give me her trust.

And part of that required me to give her that for which she did not ask. Giving her truths, at least some of them. Letting her learn me in ways I hadn't expected to allow.

And I realized yesterday, after dropping her back off in her room, that I had not considered the implications of taking my mate. What would happen to her after my purpose was complete?

It was a challenge to look that far in the future when I did not even know she existed for much of my time on Earth. Because she had not.

I had lived for centuries.

My female, for four decades. Fully immortal, but...

She was so very young. Vulnerable.

But now that I had her in my grasp, now that I knew I could not damage her in the way the queen expected, what would

become of her?

Would I keep her?

Would I be allowed to?

I gritted my teeth until the muscles in my jaw pulled taut, a red film dropping over my vision.

No one would take her from me.

No one.

I would do what I must, and she would be my prize.

Tonight, we would take a meal together once again. I was a smart enough male to know when to adjust my tactics, and I could not read Cassandra's mind, but I could read her expressions well enough now, having studied her closely all this time.

Fascinating creature, she was.

Guarded, curious.

Rarely did fear cross her features.

Self-loathing, on the other hand...

I sighed and dropped into my chair.

Over the centuries, a certainty grew within me that demons held their mates sacrosanct. Like Earth immortals, most of us never found them. It seemed across all immortalkind, mates were on the decline.

But when I learned of my female, I expected her to give me the scent of her desire, to come to me willingly, to yearn for

me as I had longed for her during the darkest days in Inferna.

She was not what I had expected. Not at all.

But she was mine.



I stared, intent, as Cassandra nibbled on roast carrots and potatoes. Over the evening meals we had shared, I noted her preference for vegetables and her aversion to meat.

Curiosity nagged at me. Why would a female with a beast within her eschew the taste of flesh?

I asked her as much before taking a sip of wine. She met my gaze before lowering her eyes to her plate and spearing a plump tomato. “Witches tend to be vegetarian. We eat meat, but only if we’ve hunted it ourselves.”

I set my glass down. Planting my elbows on the table, I steepled my fingers and rested my chin atop them. “Do shifters not crave blood, tissue, the feel of living flesh between their teeth?” I had assumed shifters were much like demons in that regard. Perhaps I did not know as much about the pests as I once believed.

The tomato was halfway to her mouth, and she paused before grimacing and lowering her fork. “Yes,” she murmured.

I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms. “And do you not house a beast?”

She nibbled her lip, her eyes darting everywhere but my face. Then she sighed and said, “Yes.”

“And you do not feel the cravings of your beast?”

She paused, her little nostrils flaring, a telltale sign she carefully considered her words, and I grinned. All her expressions fascinated me.

“I crave meat during my heat.”

A bolt of lust speared me, melting into warmth that coiled in my cock, thickening the appendage, readying for her.

“And when is your heat?” I asked, my voice deepening as flashes of naked flesh and rampant need burned behind my eyes.

She choked on the tomato, pounding a fist against her chest, and I swiftly rose to my feet. When Cassandra lifted a hand to stay me, I smirked.

As if she could stop me.

But her hacking had subsided, so I lowered myself into the chair once again, charmed by the darkening of her cheeks as she flushed with embarrassment.

She shook her head and grumbled beneath her breath.

“What was that?”

“Three—two-and-a-half months,” she mumbled before grabbing her glass and sucking down water. Her eyes darted around, never quite meeting mine.

This conversation perturbed her.

Interesting.

Most immortals, Earth-bound and realm-bound alike, engaged in and discussed sex freely, but my female acted as though she was untried.

Or violated.

My shoulders bunched at the unwanted thought, and I fought for calm before my fury could unleash.

I would save it for when I convinced Cassandra to tell me the names of those I must eviscerate.

You will betray her, yet you seek to avenge her? To what end?

A growl built in my throat, and she winced, calming my anger—at myself, this time—instantly.

We didn't speak for long minutes after that. I had many more questions, many more ways to prod and poke at her, to learn her by her reactions to that prodding and poking, but I sensed Cassandra was at her limits with this particular conversation. As was I.

So it came as quite a surprise when she broke the silence.

She took a quick sip of her water, set it down in front of her, and rolled the glass between her hands before lifting her face and meeting my eyes. Her wide, deep brown eyes framed by lush dark lashes were firm, resolute, and interest worked its way from behind my sternum all the way to my cock. So much beauty, yet so much pain within their depths.

I ached with wanting her, ached to sate her, to sate myself within her. Why every little action she took inspired such lust within me, why every layer she revealed and—even more—those she hid, intrigued me, was a mystery. I reveled in the burn it left beneath my skin.

But we had plenty of time for that.

“What’s the plan for June?”

The firmness in her voice, even threaded with her uncertainty, thrilled me even more. Cassandra, I had learned, wasn’t quiet out of ineptitude or fear. Words simply failed her. Voicing her desires even more so. She had spent so much time not saying anything at all, not letting anyone know her thoughts, her needs.

But she was loyal, eager even, to defend the female she loved so much. The coven she loved so much.

What would she do to defend her own mate, I wondered.

The silence stretched again, and she did not press, for that was not her way. She twitched, her little fingers clenching around the silverware. I watched her throat bob with a swallow.

She was desperate to make demands, but she would not, and watching her battle through it fascinated me.

“We’ll discuss the plan in due course. I’m... working out certain eventualities to ensure our success.”

Cassandra took a deep breath, her tension easing before my eyes, before nodding.

That little gesture of faith, whether she intended it as such or not, sent a shaft of guilt through me.

For she did not know I was responsible for her beloved June's predicament.

And I would not tell her.

CHAPTER II

RAZIEL

“**Y**our power... explain it to me.”

The following morning, I brought Cassandra to the indoor garden.

She was not impressed.

She mumbled about plants *needing sunlight*, and I grinned at the back of her head as she pattered around in the dirt, sifting it through her fingers, shaking her head in disappointment.

Now we sat at a bench along the edges, near a collection of wildflowers outgrowing their enclosure. Her stiff shoulders and darting eyes did not deter me.

I would learn all of her secrets soon enough.

Her throat bobbed, and she dipped her head, concealing her face with that lustrous hair. This was another one of her tells.

Irrational jealousy burned beneath my skin, and I gritted my teeth.

What male is jealous of a female's hair?

A male who yearned to wrap her in his wings.

If Mother knew how weak you've become—

When Cassandra lifted her sweet face, revealing the barest of glow from her power in her eyes, I schooled my expression to one of nonchalance.

She would not enjoy how alluring I found her. How I yearned for her more with her magic on display, manifesting in a way so unlike demons. Our souls did not beam from our eyes, lighting the way before us.

As her power faded away, revealing dark brown irises, my cock kicked.

So fucking beautiful.

Shifting, I attempted to hide my response. She would scurry away if she saw her effect on the unruly organ.

Or perhaps she would not. I still found it difficult to predict all her responses.

Something to explore another day, when I wasn't so eager to hear her voice.

She cleared her throat. "I can... make shields using the Earth's aura."

"I have met many females. Many witches." I leaned forward, elbows on my knees and arms loose. "I have seen an earth witch in my day. They can move the ground, they can

make plants grow, some can even speak to animals. Do you have any of these skills?”

She shook her head, obscuring her face with her hair once again, and this time the curling of her shoulders told me she was... ashamed or, perhaps, done with this conversation.

But I was not.

“I believe you have the skills, female. You are an exceptionally strong witch.” Her head shot up, and she looked at me beneath furrowed brows. “You do not believe me?” She pursed her lips and gazed off into the garden. “You are a strong witch. All Head Coven witches. And you have the blood of the beast within you, a beast connected to all that *lives*, which should strengthen your tie to the earth, to your power, even more. Yes, you have these skills. But perhaps you have not accessed them yet.”

She was quiet for a long while before she reached out a hand and touched the soft petal of a plant overhanging the wall of the enclosure, skating those fingers down its stem.

My teeth sharpened as my muscles tensed, instinct preparing me to take my female, to feel those delicate fingers trace over my cock. I dropped my eyes to her chest, licking my lips at the thought of kissing, licking, *biting* those little peaks.

“What about your power?” she asked softly. I raised my head, not bothering to hide the lust in my heavy eyes, and she flushed prettily, her cheeks turning a deeper brown.

Internally, I crowed with victory. “I have many gifts,” I purred. “You must be specific.”

I thought she would ask how I pulled the shadows to me and became one with them, but this female was full of surprises. Most would not see this, too focused on the surface, on her quiet, but her surprises matched her personality.

She straightened her spine. “How about a gift I haven’t seen yet?”

Inordinately pleased with this turn of events, with her growing ease with me, even if she did not realize that was what her question conveyed, I said, “I can manipulate minds.”

With anyone else, I expected fear, disgust, even rage. But Cassandra never responded as expected.

Of all the creatures in the realms, she was the only one to surprise me. She did not do it deliberately, and it made her all the more appealing.

I couldn’t stop my smile when she nodded absentmindedly, as though my words held little interest.

“Have you done it to me without me knowing?” My gaze bored into her, and her cheeks flushed even darker under the weight of my stare.

“Never.”

She nodded slowly.

Yes, my female was beginning to trust my word, even if she could not admit it to herself.

“How do you do it?”

I inhaled and released the breath slowly. This was a tactical maneuver that might not pay off, but there were few ways to gain a female’s trust in a short period of time. Exposing some of myself could be the method to gain her regard. “Your coven sister once asked if I could read minds. I cannot. I can see impressions... pictures, emotions, yearnings, memories, they flash when I... peel back the layers of a mind. It takes a great deal of power to put such thoughts in order so that they paint a coherent picture. To interpret emotions. It takes even greater power to... alter memories. To turn emotions into what would benefit me.”

She hummed. “Were you speaking the truth when you said you couldn’t read my mind?”

I chuckled. “You confound me, female. I have never encountered a being whose mind I could not read or manipulate except those with whom I share blood. But it is true.”

“Is that why... you wanted to make a deal with me? Because you couldn’t read my mind, and that interested you?”

“Partly.” I stood up slowly and fixed the cuffs of my shirt. When I looked down at Cassandra, her beautiful eyes were firmly on me. My blood simmered with desire as I looked upon her and her position of submission. What I would give to feed her my cock as she looked at me with those wide, dark eyes. To see her cheeks flush, this time with arousal, as I gave her all the pleasure she could take.

“I must leave you for a time. He will return to your room, but I will join you for our evening meal,” I rasped, my voice thick with desire.

She stood up beside me without protesting, but her shoulders fell.

Not because she wasn't strong, though she did not see it.

It appeared she was beginning to crave my company... my female enjoyed being alone, and I would give her all she needed. And my absence, if carefully imposed, would accelerate her trust in me, for she would come to yearn for me, her soul seeking me, the pull between us inexorable, as it should be between mates.

When I wrapped the shadows around us and returned her to her room, she sat on the bed and pulled her old notebook into her lap. I rarely saw her with it, but she was writing in it more and more.

Curiosity burned in me to know what she wrote. So, while she slept, I looked at every page.

It was all scratches, shapes, symbols I could not understand. Some symbols I could.

None of it made sense.

The notebook had some significance. It was the only item she wished to bring with her to my lair, after all. But I could not decipher it, and it was one more piece of the puzzle that was my female.

It did not matter, for I had several demons attempting to translate her scratches and shapes... after I had painstakingly copied them over several evenings, only stopping my work to observe her as she slept, to watch the sweep of her long lashes on her cheek, to memorize the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed evenly... peacefully. To peek beneath the blanket so I could make out the lines of her form.

Shaking my head, I gathered the shadows to me once again.

But before I left, I turned to Cassandra, taking in her lowered eyes and the small frown pulling down her full lips. “I cannot read you. At least not using my power. But I am learning you, and the more I learn, the more I can read you with my eyes, the more eager I am to fulfill your end of our bargain.”



I attempted to set thoughts of my female aside as I traveled to the small square building adjacent to my lair. Both my lair and the building had the appearance of human dwellings externally, but it was only a façade.

As I told Cassandra the night prior, I had the ability to manipulate minds. It was a risk to confess such a gift, but a calculated one. Informing her of a fearsome ability created trust.

A kernel of it, but it was a start.

I still pondered her silence and nod of acceptance. Perhaps she did not show fear in predictable ways.

It did not matter, for I would learn all there was to know about this confounding witch.

As I opened the door and entered the large, lavish space, I considered bringing Cassandra here to demonstrate exactly what I could do.

The exterior was a one-story, dilapidated home with a roof caving in, an overgrowth of plant life overtaking the foundation, ivy winding its ways up the off-colored walls. The windows were boarded up, the porch in disrepair. It appeared abandoned.

Inside, though, it was a well-appointed manse with five floors, lush carpeting, dark brown wood furniture, a dozen bedrooms, a large ballroom I had converted into a space for training, several offices—these organized hierarchically, with the smallest and barest for guests I did not like or respect. The first floor had an enclosed garden in the center with all manner of vegetation. My female would enjoy it.

Or perhaps not. She would want the plants to have access to natural sunlight, not kept alive artificially for my amusement.

I shook off the thought as I walked up the stairs to the top floor, passing several guest rooms and entering my best kept office.

Today's guest was someone I loathed, but to whom I must show the utmost respect.

It grated, and I knew I would fantasize about tearing her head off during our meeting. Perhaps hanging the headless corpse by its feet and bathing my female in the blood leaking from the stump of its neck before claiming her...

“My Prince.”

I waved the cowering male closer. “You have served me well, and the queen will know this.” His eyes widened a fraction before I tore his throat open with my claws, his corpse collapsing onto the table. Blood spread to the corners and dripped onto the floor. I adjusted my cuffs and plopped into the seat, reclining with my legs crossed as the air began to vibrate above the corpse until the mirrored surface appeared.

“Raziel,” the bitch purred seductively.

“Princess.”

She smirked, full red lips as impetuous as the rest of her. Her visage warped through the uneven surface of the spell, but I knew it well enough. Long black curls, milky white skin, piercing black eyes, and a soul fit for Inferna.

“Did you miss me?”

I scoffed. “Tell me of the queen.”

I heard the whine in her words, but I had spent too many centuries ignoring her pouting to care. “Come, now, Raz. Chaos loves spending time with me.” The implication was clear, and I shuddered, revulsion turning my stomach, but I kept my face impassive.

“My brother is not one to make intelligent decisions. The queen said you had a message for me.”

I heard her claws clack against something, perhaps the bones of her last lover. She was the Princess of Lust, after all.

“When I come to the Earth realm, I would be happy to ease some of that tension you carry.”

I gritted my teeth and squeezed the arm of my chair so hard it creaked and splintered. “I know you are not particular, Lust, but I do not fuck my siblings.”

“Your loss,” she rasped, and I heard the swish of garments, bile rising in my gorge as she released a breathy moan, followed by the slick sounds of her... pleasuring herself as we spoke. I needed to end this conversation as quickly as possible and return to my sweet witch, to look upon her purity and rid myself of this taint.

“The queen is displeased with your utter lack of *speed*,” she said through sickening pants. “Mate the female, get her blood, and kill her.”

I cracked my neck and growled low, unable to choke down my fury. Cassandra would not die. That was never my plan. She would be useful, and she would be mine, but she would live. “Do not forget. You do not rule me.”

Now the vile female laughed. “Who do you think will rule when the queen steps down?”

That made me chuckle. It was not a humorous sound. “She will never step down.”

“Do not be so sure, Raziel. If you think you will rule... you, who have only the ambitions of an enforcer, well... only one of us has been a loyal servant to our queen mother, at her side, this whole time.”

I wanted to reach through the spell and wring her skinny neck, but I only smiled. “My presence on Earth is at the queen’s request. I have never done anything *but* serve her. Remember this, Lust. You are not queen. You will *never* be queen.”

If the female was in front of me, she would be screeching and clawing, trying to gouge out my eyes and tear out my throat. As it was, she could only express her displeasure in the hardening of her tone. “Remember this, Prince of Deception. You have a job to do. And if you fail, you will suffer in ways you cannot even imagine.”

I huffed in amusement, though I did not feel the least bit amused. But it had the intended effect of angering her further. She hissed, and I drawled, “That may be true, but still, you will never rule. The queen favors Chaos.”

“And he favors me,” she gritted.

A growl ripped from my throat. “Believe what you must.” I began wiping a hand through the pool of blood to end the spell, Lust’s face wavering even more. Before she disappeared completely, I said, “Chaos would not give up the crown for *you*. You would be a whore in his court. Nothing more than you have always been.”

And as her bellows of rage cut off abruptly when my hand reached the edge of the table, I grinned.

CHAPTER 12

CASSANDRA

Raziel still hadn't taken payment for our deal, and we hadn't discussed the plan to rescue June.

Needless to say, I was getting antsy.

And I faced a strange and exciting development after he dropped me off in the windowless, doorless room.

I... didn't want to be alone.

We'd had dinner together every night, and I found myself missing his company.

I furrowed my brows as I considered the implications.

For so long, I'd avoided spending extended periods of time around anyone, including those I loved.

Company brought me to a *bad* place. A place where my father still reigned.

In the year I'd spent with his pack after my mother died, when all my coven sisters except for Colette were still not

through immortal maturity and the Elders decreed we must be sent to next of kin, I was never alone.

My father ruled his pack with brutality, but his pack mates didn't seem to mind because they were as depraved as him.

The females were just as vicious as the males.

Younglings taught to follow in their footsteps.

I had no one in that year, not even my thoughts, because Father would quickly drag me to witness acts of barbarity beyond my youthful ability to comprehend.

How could I prepare for mating hunts with females stolen from other shifter communities and human cities that resulted in mass rape and slaughter when I was raised by a gentle mother and a coven full of love?

Even Willow's mother's betrayal... even her decision to blood our neighboring Head Coven so they could enter the protection spell and slaughter my coven's mothers... it simply couldn't compare to what my father wrought.

I didn't have time to mourn my mother. Her blood staining the floor paled in comparison to the rivers of blood my father brought forth on his land.

So much fucking blood.

Blood blood blood—

I cringed, raising my shoulders to my ears while clenching my hands into fists until my nails bit into my palms.

I could thank Raziel for driving away those memories, at least for longer periods.

The only thing that used to do it was *silence*.

Now, because his presence had shaped itself into a wall between me and those putrid memories, the silence gave them fertile ground to bloom in my mind, venomous vines tightening, their sharp barbs pricking.

Bile burned my throat, bitter on my tongue.

I succumbed to it, rushing to the bathroom but too slow to make it to the toilet, and I vomited in the sink.

After the last heave, I wiped a shaky hand over the back of my mouth and fell to my knees, pressing my forehead against the cabinet door, eyes closed, breathing unsteadily.

It took long minutes to calm my heart, but I managed.

Then I went about cleaning my mess.

Fear and trauma were exhausting.

I had no illusions that the trauma would ever be fully dealt with, but in a moment of clarity—or desperation—I flattened my palms against the counter and leaned forward, staring at my pathetic reflection.

Drawn features.

Sweat dotting my forehead.

Brows pinched in agony.

No wonder Raziel didn't want to take his payment.

I swallowed hard, watching my throat bob in the reflection.

Something built behind my sternum, a heated pressure that swelled and swelled until it pressed against my spine and straightened my back. With no more room in my chest cavity, it spread to my stomach and up my throat, filling both with a buzzing, fluttering sensation. I didn't realize what it was until it reached my extremities, consuming the last bit of space inside me.

I wasn't just afraid.

I was *furious*.

At my father, yes.

But also at myself.

I let the male who'd harmed me more than any being in existence... take control of my life.

Take control of my *soul*.

Impotence threatened the burning, tingling sensation of my rage, but I pounded a fist on the counter, refusing to let it take over me as it always did.

Things needed to change.

I needed to change.

And... maybe Raziel could help with that.

If I could convince him I wasn't a pitiful creature unworthy of his lust, that is.

My relationship with sex was fragmented beyond belief, but maybe... I just needed to push through it to heal.

I laughed bitterly. I was the last being in all the realms who knew about healing. I wish I could ask Colette her thoughts, but I banished that immediately. There was no way I'd dump this on her.

But Raziel and I didn't care about each other, so if I could get my act together, maybe he'd be my chance to heal. Because... because I could use him to strengthen myself. He wouldn't coddle me because he didn't care about me.

Is that true? Sure seems like he cared when he wanted to slaughter Father for hurting you.

I grimaced.

No... he cared about my use to him. Deep down, Raziel wasn't an abhorrent male. Otherwise, Noam and Atticus wouldn't have dealings with him. He didn't like that I'd been hurt, and he wanted to use my body. My issues probably disgusted him on principle, and because he didn't want to take me when I couldn't enjoy it.

Or it was a male pride thing, needing to please his bedmates.

But that didn't change the potential for him to be a source of strength, of change, for me. With him, there weren't expectations... not since he stopped trying to fuck me, at least.

Instead of my coven's eyes on me as I tried to grow, instead of their concerns peppering me and, in the process, deflating my resolve, this place was almost a clean slate.

Besides, impotence had gotten me nowhere.

It was time to try action for a change.

I turned on the shower to let the water warm up and stepped out of my clothes.

Methodically, I scrubbed my body. After I rinsed, I shampooed my long, limp hair.

Raziel left a bunch of sweet-scented products all over the bathroom, stuff I never would've picked myself. I preferred fragrance-free everything, but if his preference was skin that smelled like fake lavender and hair that smelled like fake apple, I would deal with it.

After I dried off, I searched through the clothes Raziel provided, all neatly put away in the closet.

I should've packed my own things instead of bringing my little notebook and pen. I cursed my shortsightedness... until I realized, if I wanted my plan to have a chance of success, I needed to wear something other than leggings and baggy shirts.

Raziel had only provided a few pairs of pajamas, and I'd worn them far too often as it was.

Swallowing around a lump in my throat, I sifted through the lavish dresses, all of them shorter than I'd like.

Finally, I settled on the plainest one, a black halter made of stretchy fabric, so at least it would be comfortable, even if it exposed my legs from mid-thigh.

I didn't want to put my scars on display, and I had many all over my body—although Father spared my face, for some

unknown reason.

Maybe because it looked like a feminine version of his?

Time to get over it.

Inhaling deeply, I dropped the towel and tugged on the dress.

No bras or panties in my clothing collection, but my modest breasts didn't need support.

The exposure of it all, the cold touching my legs, the lack of layers hiding my torso, filled me with familiar dread, and sickness swirled in my stomach.

I had nothing left to vomit, thankfully.

And I was used to feeling sick.

I stumbled to the bed and plopped down on my back, the tiny bit of bravado I'd mustered, slipping away by increments until my teeth began to chatter.

Blood—

And a demon became my saving grace.

Raziel's smoky shadow flowed into the room before solidifying into his physical shape, and I knifed into a sitting position.

He's only five feet away. The longer you wait, the worse it'll be.

I didn't know where I found strength and resolve, but I used it just the same, rushing to Raziel, wrapping my arms stiffly

around his neck, going up on my tiptoes, and planting my lips on his.

CHAPTER 13

RAZIEL

Rage pounded against my ribs as I returned to my lair, and I almost did not go to Cassandra because of it.

A demon filled with anger was not fit company for a shattered witch.

But, as I was discovering, I could not resist being close to my female.

I need not have worried, for Cassandra leapt on me the moment I solidified my form, her unpracticed kiss washing away my fury more effectively than taking the heads of my enemies.

Though I would never admit it aloud, I was so shocked by the unexpected act that I stood stiffly like a fool, arms at my sides, mouth frozen, as she embraced me and pressed her lips against mine.

But then she tentatively darted her tongue on my lower lip, and it snapped me out of my stupor.

I had her pinned against the wall, one hand fisted in her hair, an arm wrapped around her waist, in the next breath.

Slanting my head, I aligned our faces so I could delve my tongue between her lips and taste her properly.

Soft. So fucking sweet.

Everything about this female was divine.

That her Elder witches sought her death and the death of her coven—

No.

Those corrupt females had no place in this moment.

You brought them into this moment by aiding them.

I growled against her mouth, even as I shuddered with the surfeit of sensation, of having her silky strands in one fist, the curve of her waist cupped in another, her small breasts pressed against my chest so our heartbeats mated as surely as our lips.

No more guilt. Not now.

I needed to coat my tongue in her decadent flavor, the sugar on her tongue, the rich, slick arousal between her thighs.

She gasped, and the sound went straight to my cock. It strained against the placket of my slacks, and I dipped my hips and pressed into the cradle of her thighs, using my lower body to lift her until her feet no longer touched the floor, fitting us against each other.

As I devoured her mouth, her hands slowly slid into my hair, and she finally wrapped her legs around my waist. I

clenched my hand on her side, wanting to feel her smooth skin beneath my fingers, but I could not lift her shirt with her tentative touches and the shy movements of her tongue addling my brain.

I groaned, a guttural sound, and she met it with a little plaintive moan that vibrated on my tongue.

“Fuck,” I muttered against her before sucking her upper lip between my teeth and biting. I wanted to cut that plush flesh, to soak my tongue in her blood. I opened my eyes to find hers shut tight, and relief weakened my knees that she was not in the same fugue state that had stopped me from taking her on her first day under my control.

I shuttered my eyes and kissed her more deeply, licking, sucking, biting, *ravenous*.

Pulling away to trail more kisses and nips along her jaw before sucking on the tender skin of her throat.

Her pulse hammered against my tongue, and I sank my teeth around it to suck a mark onto her flesh.

She shuddered against me, so I ground against her even harder.

“C-can we...” she breathed. I kept sucking, marking, unable to tear myself away from the flavor of her skin, the clean, earthy scent of her, so potent no soap could disguise it, flooding my nostrils until I was drunk with it. But it gave Cassandra enough time to gather herself, even as her next words came out unsteady. “Can we... do what you promised?”

A flush traveled from my head to my extremities, and my cock thickened and throbbed.

I *promised* to fuck her until she screamed.

I paused, my conscience poking at the back of my mind that I should question this sudden change...

But I wanted her too much to deny myself. Not when she was willing.

Not when she was *eager*.

I tossed her on the bed and tore her dress down the middle, letting it flutter at her sides, exposing her pert breasts, puffy brown nipples, my gaze traveling down the line of her stomach to the divot of her navel, her soft pussy... all of it, *mine*.

I wanted to stroke myself until I came in that navel. Let it pool there before rubbing it into her skin.

And my control over my glamor slipped.

I raised my gaze to her face as I felt the magic slip away, like a too-tight jacket being unzipped.

As she took in my true form, I rolled my shoulders and cracked my neck.

There was no use hiding from her.

She would see and know all... eventually.

She would come to crave this form and what I could give her.

The barbs on the end of my cock flared with need. They would not give her my mating venom until we both orgasmed.

The pliable barbs would stiffen as I flooded her, keeping me planted deep, making her mine, ensuring my seed stayed where it was meant to be.

And she *would* scream for me.

I awaited her screams of terror at my form—which was, admittedly, *quite* fearsome, with the four blood-red horns, two smaller ones curling over my forehead, the others enormous and wrapped around the back of my skull until they nearly touched my neck. She saw the mirrors in my eyes more clearly, the mark of my kind. My physical form remained more or less the same, but my true form was a foot taller than the humanoid glamor I used on Earth.

And, of course, the wings...

They contrasted with my dark skin and hair.

Humans believed demons to have pitiful, leathery wings.

We did not.

Mine were a dozen feet tall from tip to tip, covered in white, gold, and light grey feathers.

I stretched the connector muscles bracketing my spine, and my wings shivered and swayed, a mating display for my female.

Her mouth dropped in awe. “Y-your wings...”

I grinned, showing her my sharp teeth. Shifters had two sharp canines, vampires had four.

Demons had a mouthful.

It made me smile wider.

What use were a piddling few sharp teeth when tearing out an enemy's throat?

And when biting a mate, puncturing them in many places at once had *far* more appeal.

I fluffed my wings and let her look her fill. She had felt them around her, but Cassandra had not seen them in all their glory. Her gaze skated over the top curve, trailing down and up again, eyes gleaming.

But my mirth fled as her eyes widened and she gulped.

And she was not looking at my impressive teeth in justified trepidation.

“You're... descended from angels,” she mumbled in awe.

Rage dropped over my vision, and I turned to vapor, reappearing over her body with my forearms keeping most of my weight off of her while trapping her head in place.

“Hear me well, witch. Demons are descended from *demons*.”

She dropped her eyes to my chin, a tremor working over her frame, but my female had more spine than she believed, and she darted out her little tongue to taste her lip—enticing my cock—and whispered, “I only saw an angel when I was a witchling. Eva's father.” At my arched brow, she clarified, “My coven sister. His wings were like yours, but more gold than white. Yours... yours look like the threads of color were woven together; it's almost hard to pick them apart.”

I inhaled sharply, my gaze firmly planted on her mouth, wanting her tongue to come out and play once more.

Her shivers increased, and my anger only rose that I could not read her to know what she felt.

I tilted my head to study her face for a moment. “You really do not know.”

She shook her head.

“It no longer matters. Our kinds are divided, have been for so long we cannot claim kinship despite our shared traits.”

Cassandra nibbled her lip, and my eyes caught on the pinched flesh. I wanted to replace her teeth with mine, but the female cut through my lustful thoughts with her next question. “How are angels and demons different?”

I grunted in annoyance. This was a question I did not want to answer, but by the interest in her eyes, I could not stop myself. “Demons are far superior. Angels have a strict code of honor preventing them from doing what they must, although they forgo it often enough to slaughter my kind. And...” I ground my teeth, my irritation rising. “And demons cannot fly.” The confession ripped from my throat, leaving embarrassment in its wake. My wings were magnificent, fearsome, but I loathed admitting the angels could do something I could not.

But Cassandra only looked at me with awe suffusing her face, the admission of my lack doing nothing to diminish me in her eyes.

What a peculiar creature she was.

I would enjoy her immensely.

“We can continue this discussion later... after I take you,” I said gruffly.

I kissed her throat, dragging my tongue along her pulse point, sucking the tender flesh between my teeth. When I reached her collarbone, I nipped the protrusion, and she jumped and let out a small, breathy laugh. My heart kicked in my chest, and I shook my head to rid myself of the unfamiliar sensation.

Her breasts were the perfect distraction from it. They sloped like teardrops, small, but enough to fit my palm, a theory I tested when I cupped one reverently as my lips descended on the other, sucking the brown peak into my mouth with hard pulls.

Cassandra’s breaths rasped loud in the quiet room, and I raised my eyes as I bit down on the tender nub to ensure she was still with me.

She watched me with glazed eyes, but there it was. Her consciousness. Her soul shined so brightly through those expressive eyes.

My lids fluttered close as I suckled her gently before flicking my tongue against the furred flesh, and she moaned softly. With my free hand, I stroked from the curve of her stomach to the apex of her thighs, but when I dipped between them and felt her wet warmth, that consciousness slipped away

bit by bit. Before it completely disappeared, I slid a finger over her entrance, desperation making my frame shake.

I needed her.

I needed to join with her.

But she was no longer with me.

And I found I could, indeed, deny my uncontrollable desire.

For her.

I removed my mouth from her breast and my finger from between her thighs, tremors of unfulfilled desire racing over me as I gently lay her down so her head was supported by the pillow.

In the endless time she was off in whatever realm to which she escaped, agony took hold. Something terrible happened to my little female, and I needed to know what it was.

More importantly, I needed to know *who* did it.

I would tear out their spines and feast on the marrow.

As her consciousness returned, I wrapped the shadows around me and left the room. I felt hollowed out, unsure, and I loathed it.

This female was supposed to be a strength, for me and for my kind, but she made me weak.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I willed myself to calm, and when it came, I immediately regretted leaving her.

At the very least, whatever terrors visited her when her mind drifted away, she deserved to have her male at her side

when she returned.

But when I entered her room, the sight before me brought me to a sharp halt. It stalled my heart and ripped the air from my lungs.

Cassandra, my quiet, unassuming witch, sobbed as though everything within her was breaking apart.

The raw, grating, wet sounds ripped a fissure in my chest, and I clutched at the invisible wound.

It took time for the rage to come, but when it did, it filled me with purpose.

All who harmed her will die.

CHAPTER 14

CASSANDRA

I sobbed.

I couldn't *stop* sobbing.

That was new.

For years, I wanted the relief of tears, only to be denied.

But now, as I lay alone in my cell—and it was finally hitting me that the room I felt safe in *was* a cell—I hated that the tears came so freely.

I hated the pain that wounded after all these years.

I hated how broken I was, how I let a male who despised me, who mistreated me, break me and keep breaking me, no matter how far the distance and time between us.

And I hated that I wasn't strong enough to see things through with Raziel. That my weakness would lead to June remaining in captivity.

I drowned in self-loathing, because worst of all, I selfishly mourned the pleasure I felt, the ecstasy ripped away when

reality crashed down on me. To be on the cusp of something so beautiful, only for it to be tainted by things I couldn't change and couldn't forget.

I was a fool to think I could... what? Gain strength from making a deal with a *demon*?

Willow went to the berserkers and practically took them over.

I wasn't Willow. Couldn't be anyone but me.

Pitiful, broken Cass. The female my coven sisters tiptoed around. The female Raziel pitied so much, he wouldn't even take what I owed him.

So I sobbed until my throat was raw, until it felt like the ugly, barking cries tore it open, until I tasted a hint of iron on the back of my tongue.

My chest heaved and my breath hitched long after the last cries died away.

But even as they faded, grief bombarded me.

Luis is dead.

Wracking sobs bounced off the walls until they faded into horrible keening and then into whimpers.

I'd never see his wide smile and shining dark eyes again.

My cousin was gone.

And it hurts.

You're not numb.

You're not empty.

You hurt.

I dried myself out with all the tears I hadn't been able to cry, and now I never wanted to cry again.

But I didn't know how to move forward, and desolation crashed down on me, making my chest go concave, the sharp ache behind my sternum unbearable.

"Female."

I sucked in a breath, but I didn't turn from my position facing away from Raziel.

I had no clue when he popped into the room, but now mortification nearly drowned me.

I'd shown him... everything.

Didn't even need to say a word for him to understand.

Now... now he had my pain on a platter.

Before I could blink, he flashed to me, muscular arms lifting me to a sitting position and silky-soft wings circling around me.

A hiccupping cry escaped me as comfort fought to soothe my frayed nerves.

"Female," he repeated in that silky voice. In the enclosed space he created for us, the deep notes wrapped around me even tighter than his wings.

I shuddered, but I still didn't respond. I couldn't respond.

But his next words stalled my heart.

“Who did this to you, sweet witch?”

A ragged sound tore from my chest.

Raziel’s wings unfurled before disappearing into his back, and he gripped my shoulders and shook me. Surprisingly, it snapped me out of my grief. I stared up at him with my mouth gaping as my body went numb from the inside out.

His hands slid down my arms, stopping above my elbows. He squeezed gently, a comforting gesture at odds with everything I thought I knew about demons. Raziel said I confounded him, but he was a far bigger surprise to me.

“What happened? Tell me everything.”

The harsh demand in his voice broke a cord inside me, and I poured out words I had never been able to say aloud.

“My father... he... I was a prize for the males of his pack when they reached their first shift.” The words were barely a whisper, but they may as well have been screamed for the agony they left in my throat. “They... he’d leave me in a room full of windows so the pack could watch. The males would come in. It was always so bright. I could see everything, all the blood. So much...”

Raziel’s face turned to stone. Then, slowly, the muscles began to move, until they created an expression so fearsome, I didn’t have time to fall into my waking and sleeping nightmare. His glamor flickered before falling entirely, and his horns arched gracefully over his head.

I wanted to reach out and touch one.

I must be losing my grip.

I watched his jaw tick, and he released me before backing up a dozen feet.

His claws were fully extended, and they were far longer than any shifters'. Razor sharp and thin. They could pierce flesh, and it would be difficult to find the entry wound.

“He will die.”

The raspy statement jolted me... before I flooded with warmth. Miraculously, I wasn't completely dried out, and tears stung my eyes. I shuffled until my back pressed against the headboard. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

Raziel jerked back. His enormous frame stiffened, and his heaving chest stilled. His expression turned to one of affront, as did his incredulous tone. “I am *not* nice.”

I shook my head and gave him a small smile. Males had so much pride. “Why are you being so nice to me?” I repeated.

A long, uncomfortable silence followed. Raziel took several steps toward the bed before stopping, and his shoulders lost their tension until they dropped slightly. A defeated pose that shocked me so much, my heart pounded sluggishly for a few beats. Raziel was *always* sure, confident. He closed his eyes, and his nostrils flared. When he opened them again, they were warm and... soft.

“Because you are my mate.”

CHAPTER 15

CASSANDRA

Something changed between us the prior night.
The night I cried.

Well... something beyond his declaration.

I should be far more surprised by us being mates, but how could I be when I'd been pulled to him from the start? When his voice and company calmed me, when I craved his presence after years of basking in solitude?

Honestly, I should've known we were mates, especially after watching Naiya try and fail to deny the intense pull with Fin in those weeks they had danced around each other.

What shocked me was my belief that our bond meant Raziel wouldn't hurt me.

I was the last immortal who should believe that after my father abused my mother.

Was the bond making me naive? Ridiculously hopeful?

Or was this sense of security and certainty driven by Raziel's actions toward me?

That was something I'd have to work out over time.

Whatever the case, the intensity of our conversation changed something in me, small but profound.

It felt... good to tell someone what happened to me. For someone to understand, even if I left out most of the details.

Whether Raziel's change came from pity, I didn't care, not when he created an opening in the wall this morning. I doubted he'd let me leave, but that opening signaled far more than my freedom to roam his home.

I could come and go as I pleased, although I wasn't sure if I would wander around much. The rooms in this place didn't interest me as much as the male who resided here.

My room was safe, comfortable, now that I knew I *could* go to other areas of the house if I so wanted.

I spent the afternoon sitting on the floor and writing in my notebook, a familiar act that had become harder for me in the intervening years.

Now the images flowed, demanding that they be written, demanding that they be brought to life. And so, I scratched away on the notebook, filling pages with symbols I couldn't explain, but each time I wrote them, their weight stopped pressing so heavily on my shoulders.

After several hours, my pencil ground down to a nub, and Raziel brought me more.

I didn't ask for them, so he must've been checking on my progress, peeking in at me through his shadows.

That didn't bother me. It probably should have. Wouldn't most beings be upset at the lack of privacy? But I had so many dark thoughts and memories, his intrusion into the secret life of my notebook didn't even factor. It wasn't like my scribbles contained knowledge that would be of use to him.

I wasn't sure what they were. Whispers from the Earth in some language only the natural world understood?

Or my mind wasn't quite right, hadn't been since I became immortal, and this was a way to cope.

As a pessimist, I believed it was the former.

As the sky darkened, Raziel finally stopped snooping and joined me, leaning his big body against the wall and crossing his ankles and arms. I peeked at him every now and then, my gaze catching on the thick muscles flexing in his shoulders when he caught me, before quickly turning away. We didn't talk, but he watched me like I was a puzzle to solve.

The intensity of his dark eyes warmed me, causing a pleasant buzz beneath my skin. No nerves, no fear, no ill feelings at all.

A luxury of calm.

And I kept doodling.

My silence was nothing like before.

I was simply too busy basking in the sense of safety he provided to disrupt it.

Crossing my ankles, I turned the page and continued scratching away at the notebook, symbols flowing from my mind in endless waves.

The purge of my past shifted me.

Would it have if I'd done it sooner?

Or was it because Raziel was my mate? When he had blurted it out, his eyes searched my face, the muscles around his mouth tense, concerned.

“Do you... have questions?” he asked, tentative and guttural.

I blinked, sucked in air through my nose, and shook my head. “Not at this time,” I mumbled.

I grimaced at the memory. How could I explain to Raziel that his statement *made sense*? That it felt right? Even though I accepted that, I was worried about giving him that power. Not before I knew what, exactly, he wanted from me.

Now that I understood our connection, it didn't seem a month of sex was what he hoped to achieve with our bargain.

So I kept my questions and confessions to myself. I knew enough already; that demons could figure out who their mates were through some sort of spell or sacrifice.

Makhi was pursued by his former clan of demon-possessed warlocks *because* he was Colette's mate. They needed Colette,

our coven's lifeblood, but she had to be mated. They tried to open the rift between the demon and Earth realms by sacrificing the three lifebloods of the primary earthbound immortals.

Colette for the witches, Mena the vampiress, and a shifter Omega.

Many centuries ago, mated lifebloods shut the rift between the realms.

They were the key to opening it.

So if Raziel said he was my mate, I figured he scried or did some spell to figure it out.

It also explained why he had made a deal with me in the first place. *Partly* because he couldn't read my mind, he'd said.

Our bond was the other part. Maybe it also explained why he couldn't read me.

I should be scared. Logic dictated that. But having answers gave me a sense of security.

I shared that with Greer. Neither of us liked to be in the dark.

Our thoughts were the most fearsome creatures. The unknown a chasm so easy to fall into. Answers banished worry.

The question now, though, was what to do with this new information.

Part of me was thrilled to have a powerful mate. He could slaughter my enemies. He could protect me.

He could make me feel safe.

I never considered finding my mate, what I could offer him, who he could be *for* me.

Most witches didn't find their true mates. That my coven had in quick succession was clearly a product of our hybridity.

Immortals were meant to mate with other immortals, something the witch Elders rejected, thus cursing our kind to never find our *one*.

Would he want to be the male who acted as my shield, so I didn't always have to rely on my magic?

He could just as easily reject the bond at the end of our time together. I wasn't stupid enough to think us being mates was the only reason he had use for me.

But I felt like we had crossed a precipice, and now I was determined to figure out what, exactly, was going on. Maybe take advantage of our bond to get answers.

That made me laugh to myself.

As if I knew how to make use of such a thing.

An ache spread throughout my chest, stealing my breath, and I clenched the pencil until it snapped. I whipped my head toward Raziel, embarrassed that he had witnessed my loss of control.

He eyed my hand, still gripping half of the pencil, before wrapping shadows around himself and disappearing.

I swallowed and unclenched my hand, the shard dropping onto the floor and rolling away.

If I *had* thought of my mate... would I have dreamed he could heal me? Would it have been a comfort to me?

Why did I feel the harsh pain of loss that he hadn't magically fixed me, when I'd never even imagined *he* existed?

I shook my head and ran a finger through my hair, the digits catching on tangles.

Setting aside my irrational thoughts, I groaned and rose to my feet, stretching my protesting legs.

A shower sounded like the perfect distraction. I left the notebook and massacred pencil where they lay and gathered a change of clothes.

As I entered the bathroom, I avoided the mirror, not wanting to catch a glimpse of the self-pity I felt stamped across my face. Stripping quickly, I stepped beneath the warm stream, scrubbing myself with efficient motions.

I dried and dressed just as quickly, leaving my hair dripping down my back. When I walked into the bedroom, Raziel was stepping through the hole in the wall—and it truly was an uneven, gaping hole, barely tall enough for him to get through. I rushed over to my discarded notebook, clutching it to my chest as I shuffled over to the side table so I could tuck it away.

There were no more symbols to draw today.

When I turned around, Raziel was scanning my body, tilting his head to the side, and narrowing his eyes as if he could find the answers by looking at me hard enough. His relentless gaze caused my skin to heat and chill simultaneously, an uncomfortable, sickly sensation I couldn't explain.

When he reached my face, his eyes caressed every inch of it, until warm prickles spread from my throat into my cheeks.

Then he smiled. "I see the questions in your eyes. Ask," he ordered.

I clenched my fingers until my knuckles turned white. I had so many questions. Which one was safe to ask? Sitting on the bed, I licked my lips as I tugged my sheet of wet hair over my shoulder. "Is that why you made the deal with me?"

He stepped closer, but still kept half a dozen feet between us before arching a brow in question.

"Is me being... your mate... why you made the deal? The other part of it?"

He paused, his eyes shuttering. "Yes and no."

I nodded and looked at my lap.

Confirmation I was here for another purpose. But what?

Why hasn't he... taken what he wants?

Why don't you just ask him?

Because I was a coward worried what his answer would be.

But there were other things I could ask.

“Can you tell me about demon hierarchy?”

Surprisingly, Raziel looked pleased by the question. By my interest in his kind.

Which meant this was a line of conversation I could continue to pursue, something I filed away for later.

“It is not like witches. There is no council of experienced, battle-hardened elders overseeing the law. There is only the queen, her heir, and her progeny. All other demons must follow the royal line.”

I perked up. “Is your realm matrilineal?”

He chuckled. “No. Males and females may reign if they are of the proper bloodline. And the eldest young are not necessarily the heir. The sovereign selects whom they believe is fittest. The queen has yet to declare her successor, but I believe it shall be her youngest son or her daughter, who is the eldest of her progeny. Certainly not the middle son.”

“Why not him?”

The muscles around Raziel’s eyes tightened briefly before his features smoothed. “Because he is a disappointment to her,” he said stiffly.

By his tone, I could tell he was done explaining. I wondered if the middle son was a friend of his or someone he admired for the queen’s disdain to affect him this deeply.

Before I could ask anything else, he wrapped me in shadows. When they faded away, we were outside.

In a beautiful, wild garden.

My jaw dropped as I looked at the immense trees next to all kinds of saplings, bushes with and without berries, flowers, vegetables, even some pretty weeds. I smiled softly. Humans didn't know how to find beauty in invasive species, but weeds had such varied coloring and impressive durability, I admired them.

I moved forward, completely forgetting that I had more questions for Raziel, which was probably his intention. But I was too eager to get a feel of the earth in this beautiful place, so much so that I dropped to my knees and dug my fingers into the dirt, closing my eyes and letting the hum of its aura vibrate through my very bones.

When I opened my eyes, Raziel gawked at me, his mouth parted, his tongue darting out to lick his bottom lip.

Wonder. That's what it was.

He watched me with wonder.

And it heated my throat and cheeks, even as it made me unbearably sad. I dropped my head to the earth, unable to see that beauty on his face when it felt so wrong being directed at me.

Seeming to shake himself out of his daze, he cleared his throat. "I would like to train you."

Slowly, I pulled my fingers out of the dirt, patting it until it lay flat once again. "Why?"

His eyes hardened, and a strange thrill swirled low in my stomach. “So no one, male or female, ever harms you again.”

I ducked my face as tears burned my eyes. Blinking quickly and swallowing around the lump of emotion in my throat, I whispered, “Okay.”

“It pleases me that you do not needlessly argue,” he said through a laugh. When I looked up again, his expression was stoic, but his eyes smiled. “I have observed you for many days, and you have far more magic than you know.” My fingers twitched, a denial caught in my throat, but Raziel continued before I could blurt it out. “And you will access it all. And when you do”—he squatted down and cupped my chin—“everyone will fear your wrath.”

Doubt swirled inside me, insidious, clawing.

But a small voice in a dark, hidden corner of my mind relished every word.

CHAPTER 16

RAZIEL

“Let us train,” I said the following morning as I appeared in Cassandra’s room.

She startled, eyes darting to me before darting away.

She exposed much of herself, but now she wished to hide, to take her eyes away from me.

I rumbled in discontent.

But she agreed to train, and that is what we would do.

After I took her to see my prisoner, to witness demon justice, I confirmed that my Cassandra had a core of strength within her that only needed the right impetus to draw out.

She wrapped it around her pain, a vessel she refused to touch, an enemy she could only vanquish if she unleashed her power. She had not cowered when I took the male’s life.

She was glorious.

And I would see her in all her glory the moment I helped unleash her powers.

I never failed before, and I would not now, not in this most important of tasks.

As Cassandra walked the garden, she paused beside a rosebush, stroking her fingertips over the thorns, painting beauty upon them.

A rock formed in my throat, another an unsettling weight in the pit of my stomach.

“Sit, pet,” I said gruffly.

She flinched, ever so minutely, and I narrowed my eyes.

As she glanced at me over her shoulder before following my directions, slowly lowering herself to the ground and crossing her legs beneath her, I searched through my memories of other instances of that signal of distress.

She startled when I settled behind her, my chest pressed to her back, her sweet smelling hair brushing my lips and cheek. I bracketed her legs with mine, and her spine stiffened.

“Relax. “

If anything, her frame tensed further. “I thought we were training,” she mumbled.

I buried my nose in the curve of her neck and inhaled, the fine tremor rolling over her, hardening my cock as it prepared to fill her, pleasure her. I growled low and pressed my lips against her throat. “We are training. I will help you connect to your power. To do that, you must relax.”

I wrapped an arm around her waist and tugged her closer. Gradually, she melted into me. I licked the shell of her ear and reveled in her little shudder. “Good, pet.”

And her back arched away from me.

My mouth parted in realization.

“Cassandra,” I murmured. Her breath caught, and she slowly softened against me. “You are doing so well, *Cassandra.*”

This time, she shivered, a fine movement of swelling arousal, and I smiled against her soft skin. Satisfaction filled me.

My female wants her name, and I shall give it to her.

For long minutes, we sat as we were, breathing as one. Her heartbeat matched mine, and her head lolled as if she was on the precipice of slumber.

Perfect.

Time to begin.

“Like you, I have several powers. And in order to connect to our powers, to wield them, we must embrace them.” Her breathing picked up slightly, but she did not interrupt. My arm flexed around her waist. “Power is your only friend. Your power does not judge you, does not seek to harm you, and would do anything to defend you. It is part of you, a part you must welcome like a lover, body, mind, and soul.” I spoke the words with conviction, for this belief had served me well, but my instructions brought back the unwanted memories of

Cassandra's questions about the demon queen's *middle son*. My mother despised me despite my best efforts to do as she bid, and speaking of such things, even if my female did not know I spoke of myself, made me feel like a youngling desperate for my mother's approval once again. It did not matter that I never wanted the throne, but the queen's disapproval grated on raw nerves just the same. Cassandra shifted slightly against me, her hair tickling my throat and drawing me out of my morose thoughts. I inhaled deeply before releasing the breath slowly. "Which power are you most familiar with?"

I slid my palm between her breasts, over her collarbone, until I reached her throat. I wanted to feel her pulse.

Strong and steady. Real and true.

She swallowed against my grip. "Witch magic."

I hummed. "Close your eyes and reach for your power. Do you feel it? Do you feel it rising for you?"

A pause. "Yes," she whispered.

I rumbled in approval. "Now tell it what to do. Tell it... to make things grow. It is not simply a shield. Your power gives life, Cassandra. You control it. Make it give life."

Closing my eyes along with her, I tried and failed to master my body's response. Her power was not the only thing rising for her, I thought ruefully, as my stiff cock brushed against her generous backside.

But now was not the time.

She would be mine for eternity. I could give her this gift before taking her, before claiming her.

I would give her *everything*.

As I explained to Atticus when I finally deigned to answer his incessant phone calls.

I smirked, remembering his irate demands.

“I do not need to explain myself to you, warlock.”

“Raz—“

“But our years of cooperation compel me to reassure you,” I interrupted. “Cassandra will not be harmed. She will never be harmed again.”

Silence, Atticus’ preferred weapon, followed.

But I was no weak-willed Earth immortal, and I let it linger.

Finally, he spoke. “As long as you’re loyal to your mother, you’ll hurt her. It’s inevitable.”

I tensed, a growl rattling in my chest, the intrusion of Atticus’ unwanted warning disrupting the calm I hoped to instill in Cassandra as it rolled from my body to hers.

The longer her power did not cooperate, the more her body locked.

Our session was at an end, my thoughts in disarray, but I latched onto what I knew for certain.

She did not trust her witch gift. Or she did not trust what she could do with it if it was fully unleashed. There was a block I would have to uncover before helping her embrace this power.

But as she twitched in agitation, thought about her beast.

I had never seen Cassandra show her beast, not once, not in the many hours I spent watching her, cataloging her every movement, every breath.

But perhaps because she did not rely on her beast, it would be easier to draw forth. Perhaps she did not have as many barriers to that aspect of herself, that power within her, to prevent it from defending her properly.

After rising fluidly to my feet and extending a hand to assist her onto hers, I grinned.

I could certainly help her find her beast.

I knew beasts well enough.

I was one, after all.

CHAPTER 17

CASSANDRA

Raziel didn't say where we were going, even though I asked several times.

Every time I brought it up, he smirked at me before picking up the pace through the dense forest.

Eventually, I got tired of his non-answers and decided to move on to other topics.

“How did you meet Atticus?”

He chuckled, and his features softened. “He tried to kill me. Several decades ago, I hunted demons near his clan. Atticus and his males believed me a threat to them and surrounded me.”

“Were you? A threat?”

He smirked. “I am *always* a threat, sweet witch. But they were not my quarry on that day.” I huffed a laugh. Raziel was almost as arrogant as Makhi. “Atticus is a fierce male, an honorable one. But his weakness is a desire for knowledge,

and he proposed we exchange it rather than come to blows. He amused me, so I agreed.”

“And you’ve been friends ever since.”

“Yes. *Friends*. As much as any immortal can be.”

I nodded to myself. Immortals had an incredibly hard time trusting one another, even within our own kinds. That Atticus and Raziel formed a bond at all was pretty incredible, especially considering Earth-bound immortals’ fear of realm immortals.

We walked on in silence for several minutes before I asked my next question. “What do you get out of this month with me?”

Raziel stopped abruptly, a muscle in his jaw jumping, before he continued dragging me between trees. I was beginning to think the topic was off limits, but he finally grumbled before saying, “I wanted to... know you.”

I narrowly avoided tripping over a rotting stump. Raziel paused briefly to help me over it before taking off at the same rapid pace. “Is that all?”

“What is your *true* question, Cassandra? Do not be vague. It is beneath a female such as yourself.”

Nibbling my lip, I asked, “A female like me?”

Raziel made a gruff, irritated noise in the back of his throat. “You are a witch of incredible strength, and a female without pretense. Ask your true question.”

I swallowed, internally disagreeing with his assessment but not dumb enough to disagree out loud when he seemed open to answering me. “What do you want... *after* this?”

He sucked in a breath, but his pace didn't falter. “I want my mate beside me.” Warm flutters took off in my stomach, competing with choking fear. What if I could never physically mate with him? Even if I could, what if my coven never accepted him? He seemed to notice my turmoil, glancing at me before murmuring, “But that is something we shall discuss at another time.”

As we crossed a little stream full of algae, surrounded by lovely, swaying cattails, the water soaking through my flats until my toes prickled with cold, my coven flashed in my mind, their image merging with visions of Eva and Willow blasting their magic at Raziel as Naiya snuck up behind him with a dagger. My mouth filled with saliva, and I swallowed it down. Instead of voicing my fears, I rasped, “I expect my sisters will be looking for me.”

I bit my lip. As shameful as it was, my sisters had been far from my mind more often than not.

I was a bad Head Coven witch.

They'd be focused on benefiting our coven. They wouldn't be consumed by the male essentially holding them captive.

Well... not exactly captive, since I came willingly.

And Colette, Naiya, Willow, and Greer *did* come back mated after being in proximity to their mates, regardless of the

circumstances...

You're just justifying your behavior. You haven't thought of them because you're so focused on what Raziel is making you feel.

And now that Raziel opened the possibility of something beyond our deal, I missed my coven and dreaded my return in equal measure.

Raziel scoffed, distracting me from my troubled thoughts, then grabbed my forearm tighter, pulling me to the opposite bank. The mud was thicker here, and he had to wrap a burly arm around my waist to keep me upright when I slipped. Everywhere our bodies touched burned, and I jerked my head up to look at his face and see if he felt the same thing.

His lips thinned and nostrils flared. His cheekbones looked more prominent for a moment, and I could've sworn I saw the shadow of his horns, but it might have been a trick of my imagination.

We stood there in the mud. It probably amounted to seconds, but it felt like a lifetime, so easy to get lost in the dark depths of his smoldering eyes.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "They would never find you," he rasped.

I furrowed my brows, and he answered my unspoken question before I could get it passed my lips. "Do you not know, sweet witch? We are not on your Earth."

My jaw dropped, and he chuckled, the sound more menacing than humorous. “We are in a pocket between the demon and Earth realms. They will not find you here. You are lucky—or *unlucky*—to have made a deal with the only demon capable of traversing from Earth to such a pocket and back again. It is why I do not need to confine you, I do not need to chain you, I do not need to place an enchantment on you that hides your powers.” He tore his eyes away from me, gripped my elbow hard, and began dragging me through the forest again.

“A pocket,” I mumbled.

“You are familiar with them?”

I nearly tripped on the branch on the ground, and he hefted me up by my arm. He glared at me, as if I should’ve known there would be impediments on the floor, just waiting to knock me over.

I almost laughed, but considering the circumstances, I decided it was best not to. “Yes, I’ve heard of pockets. I thought they only existed in the fae realm.”

This time, Raziel rumbled in discontent. “The fae,” he spat. “Useless creatures. All they care about is their own petty squabbles.”

He wasn’t wrong. Even Naiya’s mate, Fin, who used to be the Blood King of the fae, would say the same thing. Fae wars were notorious for lasting generations, to the point the fae currently engaging in them didn’t even remember how they started... because they weren’t alive *when* they started.

Raziel made a few more disgusted noises before continuing. “There are pockets everywhere, Cassandra. There are pockets within realms, and there are pockets between realms. There are many such pockets between the Earth and demon realms. How do you think demons enter this realm now that the rift is shut?” I twisted toward him, grinding my feet to a halt. A smile curved his lips. “Ah, yes, you witches believe no demons can come through. You are partially right. The vast majority of demons do not have the power for such a feat, and it requires much sacrifice. But a few have succeeded over the centuries.”

And we were off again. The trees were so thick, it was hard to see what was in front of us. My mind was even thicker, sluggish, trying to process all the information Raziel had given me.

So many questions. Where do I start?

“Is that why... when I feel the Earth’s aura, it feels familiar but... off?”

“Obviously.”

Internally, I shrugged. That probably was a dumb question.

“Did you come to Earth through a pocket? The first time, I mean.”

Raziel continued dragging me, refusing to answer the question for a time. I had just given up on getting a response when he said, “No. I was here before the rift was shut. Now hush. We have arrived.”

We had reached a sort of clearing, one covered in dead grass and refuse and old carcasses. It smelled rank, like death and decay.

And... there were dozens of demons... career oozing.

A fire burned brilliantly in the center of the clearing, and the demons circled around it, some fighting, some drinking, some... fucking.

“Are those... demon females?”

“No. Those are human females.” The words came out through gritted teeth, and I wondered what upset him also much. He didn’t keep me waiting this time. “They must know of a demon on the other side who lures human females to the pocket. Or perhaps they know this is that demon’s preferred location for such mischief.”

I looked closer at the sight before me.

Grimacing faces. Bloody lips. Torn clothing.

These humans weren’t here willingly. I listened to Raziel’s explanation half in a daze, anger hardening in my stomach until it felt like a lead weight. “These demons are not powerful enough to speak to any on the other side, but there are demons in the Earth realm who enjoy sending humans to pockets where they can be used for the amusement of our kind. Demons have a variety of proclivities. Humans refer to them as the cardinal sins. That is much too simple of an explanation, as much of what humans believe is. But there are trickster demons who enjoy such pursuits, and there are lust demons

who enjoy taking advantage. Then, there are the rage demons, fear demons, who enjoy taking things to... depraved places.”

I chanced a glance at him, and he looked far too happy about how *depraved* demons could be, his cheeks raised with his wide grin. I licked my dry lips and tried to clear my head of the buzzing noise that came the moment I realized the humans were being violated. “Why are we here?”

He swung around so he faced me before bending one knee. He was so tall, even in this position, that our faces were nearly parallel. Then he peeled back his lips, showing off sharp rows of teeth. I gulped and looked down. His claws were extended, too.

“Because, regardless of how much this sight amuses me, it is my duty to prevent such things. Demons are not allowed to *play* with mortals or immortals without the express consent of the queen and her offspring.” He reached up and ran a palm down my throat, and I shivered. “I could easily kill these males for this disloyalty. But I have uses for them. Now, you harness your beast.”

He rose swiftly to his feet and stalked into the clearing before I could take my next breath. Several demons noticed his approach and began shouting. Then, he crossed his arms and said, “There is a witch watching you. Do with her what you will.”

And he disappeared in a swirl of shadows.

I froze in place as all the demons turned toward me. As one, they descended, and the first thing I could think of doing was

what I always did... bring up an earth shield.

And the demons crashed against it in an endless wave.

There was only a dozen of them, but it felt like an army, one slamming against the shield, flying backwards, and another quickly taking his place. Again and again.

Ruthlessly.

Inexorably.

Shock coursed through me just as relentlessly, numbing me to the cool night air, the breeze, the scent of forest and fire.

And in my addled mind, despite Raziel provoking the demons, I kept thinking *he'll come back*.

When I can't do more than shield, when my energy wanes, he'll come back.

But he didn't.

And terror cut through the shock. With it came tremors starting from my fingers, racing up my arms and down my torso, until my entire body shook with them.

Still... he didn't come back.

And the demons were getting tired of slamming against my shield.

One must've returned to the fire, because when he approached me again, he had one of the humans with him, the woman thrashing in his arms, terror cutting across her face, her breasts exposed through her torn clothing and covered in grotesque, seeping marks.

She looked like my nightmares.

The demon smiled at me, full of malice, his orange skin gleaming in the shadow of the fire as he extended his claws to slice the human's throat from ear to ear, blood splattering so forcefully it soaked the ground in front of me.

I gasped and shuddered as her body dropped.

The demon's hand was covered in blood, and he grabbed his cock through his shorts, aggressively squeezing as he leered at me.

And I became a creature of rage.

The shield dropped just as my consciousness fled.

Impressions pounded against what remained of my mind.

Limbs tearing and flying.

More blood gushing.

Tendons between teeth. Throats torn out.

Limbs. Limbs.

Heads. Torsos.

Ages of macabre visions until I slowly drifted back into my body.

First, I felt the hard-packed ground under my back.

Wet between my fingers.

Iron on my tongue.

And finally... finally I felt *it*.

My beast.

CHAPTER 18

RAZIEL

I hiked a limp Cassandra up, cradling her against my chest.

Unlike with full shifters, the rise of her beast had not shredded her clothes, her modesty preserved.

It would be dishonest to claim that did not disappoint me.

Blood streaked across her face and throat, coating her mouth, her hair clumped with it.

Even more drenched her shirt and pants, smearing my clothing. I buried my face in the curve of her throat and inhaled, taking in the incredible scent of earth and iron, moving my face from side to side so the blood of her enemies painted my cheeks and chin.

She lost consciousness shortly after she slaughtered every single demon in the clearing.

I was gladdened by this.

I did not want her to watch me kill the human females.

They had been exposed to demon seed, could be carrying my kind even now. Such pairings must be sanctioned by the queen, and she had not.

She would not.

She would not even come to the pocket to pass judgment, nor would Lust or Chaos.

They never did, forcing me to pass messages through the ceremonial bowl using demon sacrifices.

A power play, one I was sick of but to which I continued to capitulate.

Yet Lust accused me of disloyalty, and the queen showed me disdain.

I ground my teeth, my arms flexing around the soft weight of my female, but one glance at her face eased my tension.

Her bow lips were parted, long, dark lashes against her cheeks. A pretty sight, as always. I would never tire of watching her sleep.

Yes, it was good she did not witness the humans' deaths, even if they were killed with mercy.

The humans fled my mind as it began recounting my sweet witch's savagery.

Her beast was... *glorious*.

Vicious.

It tore the demons apart, and it relished taking their flesh between her fangs, tearing, and drinking blood, roaring to the

sky in victory until a chill raced over my skin.

I stroked my cock through my slacks as I watched her destroy the males.

And now it hardened for her once again.

Grumbling in discontent, I tried to master my response. It was not the time. I would only fuck her into consciousness after we mated.

The first time... I needed her to be *present*.

I wrapped us in shadow and traveled to my home.

Rather than depositing her in her room, I took her to mine, placing her limp body on the enormous bed.

The light was dim, as I preferred it, and the room itself rather small, fitting only the large bed and a chest with weapons next to the door.

I was a simple male. Though my home was opulent, as befitting my station, my chamber was not.

Seeing her in my bed filled me with possessiveness. My chest swelled with it, and I ran a hand down her side before leaning back to soak in the sight of her swallowed up by the mattress and blankets and pillows.

I did not know how long I watched her, only that I could not stop.

I did not move until a sweet scent tinged with a hint of fresh blood floated in the air.

Furrowing my brows, I scanned my surroundings to find its source. I inhaled deeply, and my eyes widened as I swiveled my head back around to gawk at my mate.

Her eyes were open, the pupils overtaking all color. Sweat beaded on her brow, her chest heaved, and one hand traveled from her stomach to between her thighs before clenching into a fist.

My cock wept as my control disintegrated.

“My heat,” Cassandra whimpered. Her eyes fluttered shut and her pelvis arched, the scent of arousal blooming in the air, making my glamor waver.

Fuck.

“You must tell me what you require,” I husked.

She groaned, her head rolling from side to side, lustrous dark hair a curtain over her pillow. The contrast of her burnished skin against the white sheets so beautiful and pure it nearly brought me to my knees.

I swallowed hard, every muscle tense and ready to pounce on my female, to ease her, but I restrained myself with great effort, the cost of it borne in the violent tremors racking my frame, in the hands fisted at my sides, in my final loss of control over my glamor. “Tell me what to do, Cassandra.”

She whined, churning her thighs together, but I could not go to her, not now, not like this, not before knowing what she would accept from me.

So I voiced the enchantment to ease her heat.

Even as it subsided and her form relaxed, her chest continued to heave, her pouty lips parted, desperate to let in more air.

Her lids fluttered open, that dark brown gaze boring into me. “Thank you,” she mumbled hoarsely.

I frowned. “I cannot prevent it forever. The longer I restrain your heat, the worse it shall be when it is allowed to come.”

She gulped and licked her lips, a nervous movement that, nonetheless, aroused me further, making my cock throb and leak seed for her.

“What do you require?” I asked softly. I still made no moves toward her. While she no longer worried about her physical needs overriding her mind, every instinct in me demanded I rut her hard, long, and proper.

Except the instinct to protect my mate.

It recognized taking her thus would damage her, would make me the being from whom she required protection, a thought so vile I could not stomach it.

A tear leaked from her eye, and my heart spasmed. “I don’t know,” she whispered morosely. “I don’t know what to do.”

“If...” I paused, grimaced at the words I must say. “If you would like to be confined, I can leave you.”

“I-I ca-can’t have sex with you.”

“I know.”

I said no more.

Cassandra had much taken from her over the years.

Whatever decision she made now... it must be hers.

What has become of you, Raziel, Prince of Deception?

I ignored the protesting voice in my head.

I remained the male I had always been.

But not to her.

Never to her.

I would visit much pain on her in future, but in this moment, I could be... softer.

She would not meet my eyes, but her next words were firm. “Can you... ease me without the... th-the—“

“Without fucking you,” I said as calmly as possible, even as my cock twitched in interest.

She hesitated, then gave me a quick nod.

My brave witch.

“Of course. I shall give you what you need.”

I watched the bob of her throat as she swallowed, opening my inner eye for the thousandth time to see if I could finally read her emotions.

Still nothing.

Frustration built inside me, but I would not allow it to consume me.

My female needed me.

And I would give her all she required.

CHAPTER 19

RAZIEL

L ick.
Suck.

Swirl.

Cassandra's nipples were hard as diamonds as I lavished them with the attention they deserved.

Blood dripped from her claw marks on my chest, her beast giving her weapons fearsome enough to tear out my heart, but every slice only increased my pleasure and determination to guide her to release.

My female vehemently demanded I fuck her and flew into a rage when I refused.

I had to slip off my shirt and tear it into strips to bind her hands to the headboard before I lost control and gave into the beast's desires.

The little witch had asked that I not fuck her before her heat pulled her into its throes, and I was stupid to acquiesce. In this

state, her beast would claim me, and I would have what I needed.

But she had become... precious to me.

I wanted her after my task was complete.

I wanted her regard, not her loathing.

When she gripped my front horns firmly in her dainty hands, stroking them in a way that sent jolts of pleasure to my cock and near made me spill my seed on the bed, I growled viciously.

She snapped her teeth at me and growled back.

So I tied up my female, and she made a pretty picture for me as she jerked against the bonds and demanded *more*.

But I did not know when I would have access to her body once again, so I took my time, stroking the soft skin at her sides, running my palms over her warm stomach, dipping a finger into the divot at its center, sucking her nipples until they bruised, and she keened.

When I finally touched between her thighs, swirling my fingers through slick arousal and fertile blood, her breaths stuttered and turned to gasps and whimpers.

I touched her softly, slipping through the obscene amount of slick that coated her pussy and thighs.

And I brushed kisses down her sternum, over the gentle curve of her stomach, across her pubic bone, plunging my

tongue in her wet heat, slurping obscenely at the offering of tart female pleasure spiced with iron.

Her slick and blood could sustain me for all the days of my life. Rumbling against her soft flesh, I delved deeper, licked faster, sucked harder.

Her hips levitated off the bed as a broken sob ripped from her throat, but I did not make my female wait.

I took her clitoris between my lips and flicked my tongue against it rapidly until she soaked my face in slick, the orgasm rolling through her in waves of bliss and leaving her mouth in ragged screams.

But she was not eased. Would not be, not fully, unless I fucked her full of cum.

I did the next best thing.

I did not bother lowering my zipper; I tore a hole in the front of my slacks, so my thick, hard cock sprang free, the barbs flaring with interest, ready to give my mate my claim.

But instead of squeezing the stalk of flesh inside her, spreading her tight walls until they made room for the male made for her as I wanted to do, I wrapped a hand around my cock and stroked hard and fast.

Sweat coated my chest and stomach, my breathing raspy, as I brought myself to culmination and spent over her mound, the seed glazing her soft, bare skin, dripping over her pussy to mingle with her slick. My barbs flared, but quickly settled with no female flesh to grip them.

With my chest heaving, I slid embarrassingly shaking fingers through the mess until they glistened with my cum. Slowly, with my gaze intent on my destination, I slipped them between her folds and plunged them deep inside her.

I lifted my head just in time to watch Cassandra throw hers back and scream loud enough that the servants must have heard, her body locking and releasing again and again with each shock of pleasure.

Beautiful.

She rolled her head on the pillow as her screams turned to pitiful moans of lingering pleasure, and satisfaction arrowed through my heart.

My cock twitched, and I knew I would be ready for her again in a moment if she so desired.

But she did not.

The haze cleared from her eyes as the frantic heartbeat shaking her breasts slowed and steadied.

The heat would make demands again, but after this moment of satisfaction, it would be nothing she could not handle without me.

I grimaced in displeasure, but the gratitude suffusing her face chased it away just as quickly.

She tugged on the bonds, panic replacing that soft expression, and I quickly sliced them away.

“Your beast wanted to force a mating...”

She licked her dry lips. “I know. It’s okay.” To my horror, tears swam in her eyes before slipping down her cheeks.

But she calmed it with her words.

“Thank you.”

CHAPTER 20

CASSANDRA

I woke up to clarity.
To... renewal.

My mind couldn't separate from my body during my heat, and every single thing Raziel had done to me flashed behind my eyes.

Every kiss. Every stroke. Every lick.

His words of praise.

Beautiful female.

You are doing so well.

My sweet witch.

All of it covered me in an effervescent film, tickles of pleasure and comfort and... happiness.

The familiar ugliness, the *taint*, nowhere to be found in that memory of ecstasy.

It'll be back.

Not now. And that was enough. It was more than anything I could've hoped for.

How sad was it that my mate not taking advantage of me at my most vulnerable made me feel such bliss? But it was the truth.

Bliss.

For doing what he should do without praise. For doing the bare minimum.

Not that I thought Raziel would demand adulation for his show of restraint.

His care made hope bloom in my chest, right beside the quiet coven bonds near my heart.

Those bonds had always been my greatest comfort.

They weren't intrusive, only let me know if my coven sisters were safe and alive.

What would I feel if I bonded with Raziel?

I slowly opened my eyes and stared at the arched ceiling.

I wouldn't get ahead of myself. One night where he behaved admirably wasn't enough to take that step.

He's behaved admirably almost from the start.

I blinked away the love-sick thought.

Hearing a shuffling sound from the left, I turned my head.

And there he was in all his glory. Bare chested, his dark skin gleaming in the dim light of the room.

Small nipples furled in the chill of the morning.

He was thick, muscular, and physically impressive.

His size should be threatening.

But males far smaller than me had done harm. Size didn't create evil.

Only evil did.

And as I stared at him, I saw what I hadn't noticed before. And it caused sick to swirl in my stomach until I tasted bile in the back of my mouth.

His flesh was covered in scars... as many as mine.

What had he suffered?

And when?

"Do demons go through immortal maturity?" I blurted out.

Raziel straightened in the chair, and I dragged my eyes away from the evidence of his pain to his deep, dark, fathomless eyes. "Yes. Around the age of Earth immortals."

"Do you..." I bit my lip before sucking in a quick breath. "Do you have something to make... tattoos and piercings and scars permanent?"

"Not in Inferna."

I sank into the plush mattress and pillow, his words rocking me to my core.

Raziel was tortured before he became immortal.

Tears pricked my eyes, and he knifed to his feet and was at my side in the next second. The male was so fixed on my every twitch, he knew exactly what I was thinking. “Do not cry for me, witch.” The words were gentle, even as they were demanding. I shook my head and cried harder.

He clenched a hand before reaching for me, and I quickly grabbed and squeezed it in mine. “I guess... I guess we aren’t that different,” I murmured, my throat thick with tears.

He smiled ruefully. “We are quite different, female.”

As he sat on the edge of the bed, he never relinquished my hand.

The silence wasn’t a bad one.

It was an acknowledgment.

I wanted details, but I knew better than to ask. Sharing pain... that was something we each had to choose ourselves. The when, the how much, the why, were deeply personal.

He hadn’t forced me to speak my pain into words, and I wouldn’t demand it of him.

Raziel eventually pulled away from me and ran a hand through his coily hair.

I wanted to do the same, to feel it between my fingers, to grip it in pleasure that wasn’t tainted by fear or permissible because of my beast.

I wanted to be whole.

I wanted to be whole *with him*.

Guilt threatened to claw a path over my ribs as I thought of June.

She should be my sole purpose in this endeavor, and I had become caught up in the male who should be a tool to free her.

But would she be angry with me?

I saw her dark eyes lit with mirth and knew the answer.

June was selfless in all ways. And she loved my coven like we were hers. In fact, she wanted to join our coven. We played together as witchlings, loved each other like sisters.

No, she would be happy for me.

But the guilt lingered just the same.

Raziel provided the distraction from it.

“I would tell you who I am.”

My heart skipped a beat. He inhaled and exhaled several times, but he kept his eyes averted, focused on the far wall beside the door. “I am the Prince of Deception. The second son of the Queen of Inferna.”

My jaw dropped, but I didn’t move another muscle. Didn’t breathe.

“I don’t know what that means,” I mumbled.

“It means I am in the Earth realm to complete a task for my queen,” he rasped.

Finally, my body and mind caught up to his revelation.

Raziel *was* important.

And he was a threat to every single Earth-bound immortal.

And the mortals of Earth, besides.

Because the Queen of Inferna was the demoness who ordered the lifebloods captured and sacrificed to open the rift between our realms.

Raziel possessed his own body, so he didn't possess humans and immortals... but most demons did.

And some made meals of mortals.

I scrambled to a sitting position and slammed my back against the headboard, scooting as far away from Raziel as I could, my heart tearing to pieces with every bit of distance between us, even as the logical part of me screamed he was a threat.

How could I be so naive?

Easily. This is why your coven protects you. You're useless. Stupid. You understand nothing.

I proved my sisters right.

I needed to be protected, hidden away, not off trying to play the game of immortalkind.

"What task?" I choked out, dread turning my blood to ice.

He didn't try to stop me or comfort me, no wings to calm my pounding heart, and his next words were devoid of emotion. "You know what it is."

My cheeks felt cold, and I brushed the back of my hand over them. When I pulled it away, it was wet with tears I

didn't feel falling. "Tell me," I begged.

He finally twisted around to look at me, and I sucked in a breath at the strain on his face, the indecision and torment and regret. His voice may have lacked emotion, but his expression said it all.

He was conflicted, and everything in me yearned to reach out to him.

Useless.

"I must open the rift and unite our realms, Cassandra," he said gently.

Achingly gently.

I sobbed, slapping a hand over my mouth to cover the sound of my weakness.

And Raziel watched me with mournful eyes.

"You can't," I blubbered. "You can't."

"I must."

"Raziel... please. You can't. The humans will be at risk of enslavement and death. Earth immortals... we're in so many conflicts, so many will be slaughtered if the realms are united. You can't. Please. I'll do anything." I brought my trembling hands together in entreaty. "Anything you want."

He sat still, immovable, except for his jaw, the muscles working and twitching. His gaze bored into me, and I swallowed down more sobs, knowing they wouldn't make a

difference. Not when he'd had this task hanging over us from the start.

Did he have it from the start? Or... before?

“Goddess,” I moaned. “Were you responsible for the... the demons taking the lifebloods. Colette—“ A choked sound halted my questions, and Raziel swiftly shook his head, rising from his seat and moving around the bed. I kept my eyes trained on him, never looking away, and he dropped to his knees in front of me.

Thankfully, he didn't touch me.

I would disintegrate into a million pieces if he did.

“No. I swear it. Those demons worked outside the queen's commands. The Princess of Lust—my sister—ordered them to do what they did, *against* my mother's orders. The queen would happily kill the lifebloods, but she wanted the task in *her* hands so as not to share power. Those demons... they ruined her opportunity to use the lifebloods.“ He grimaced. “I am sorry to say I would have killed them. For my kind. But that is no longer a viable option.”

“You could've had the lifebloods many times over. You could've taken Colette, an Omega, the vampiress, at any time.”

His lips twisted. “The vampiress is impossible to access.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “You would have if she wasn't,” I said hoarsely.

“No. Not after Atticus helped me find another way.”

And that made my stomach lurch. If he was involved... “He knows?”

Raziel shook his head. “Not the details, no. But he provided me with some ancient demonic texts brought to Earth by my kind *before* the rift closed. Not even a warlock as skilled as Atticus can read in the Infernal tongue. He did not know how significant they were to my cause.”

Questions barraged my mind, but they weren’t important at that moment.

“Please don’t do this. Do you want me on my knees, begging?”

His eyes flared and dimmed. “Not like this.”

In a flash, his arm shot out and he cupped the side of my neck, pulling me to him so our foreheads touched. “I told you this because I want your trust, my female. I want our mating, and it cannot happen with lies between us.” I opened my mouth—to say what, I didn’t know—but he shook his head and dipped his face to plant a soft kiss on my lips. I stiffened instinctively, but even with Raziel’s confession, I couldn’t recoil from his tenderness, couldn’t find the fear that had once been so familiar. He pulled away and muttered, “I will... wait to do the spell. I will take your thoughts under advisement.”

Relief crashed into me until my entire body went weak and limp. Raziel helped me lay back against the pillow, and I let him, too exhausted from my heat and his confession to do anything but act as his doll as he situated me perfectly in the middle of the bed.

“Sleep now. We shall talk again when you are well rested,” he said, pulling shadows to him before disappearing.

Before I slipped into slumber, the nagging, disturbing thought crossed my mind.

He’d been careful to not promise me anything but a delay.

And now I needed to convince him to betray his kind for mine.

CHAPTER 21

RAZIEL

Guilt was a new emotion for me.
I did not enjoy it.

Not at all.

And part of me resented Cassandra for inspiring it.

That resentment could not overshadow my desire and...
tender feelings for her, however.

And the guilt only grew as I thought of my lies—or, more
precisely, my prevaricating.

The realms would be united.

As much as my female had my regard, my kind had my
loyalty. I could not sacrifice tens of thousands of demons, not
even for my mate.

But I could lessen the guilt by being honest with her on
another front.

Cassandra had been with me for over two weeks, and I was
running out of time. The mating must occur, and soon. I

chided myself for exposing such an enormous secret to her, one so large it undermined the tentative trust I had built within her, but perhaps all was not lost.

Only weeks ago, I would not believe myself capable of confessing part of my plans to her. I would not have threatened the success of my mission in such a way.

But keeping such a secret between us festered within me. The feeling only grew after she allowed me to see her through her heat, trusting me with the gift of her body, a body that had suffered greatly.

Giving her some truth eased some of my guilt, yet my unease remained firmly planted without divulging everything.

Yet I could not give it to her without sacrificing my purpose.

She came down for the evening meal as usual, and the sight of her in the doorway settled some of my worries.

Truly, this female was full of surprises.

And... she wanted to place her faith in me. I sensed it in my very bones.

Hesitantly, she lowered herself into the seat across from me, flashes of pain and guilt crossing her face. I gave her those emotions.

“As long as you’re loyal to your mother, you’ll hurt her. It’s inevitable.”

Fucking Atticus and his fucking warning.

To distract Cassandra, I barked at a servant standing stiffly against the wall behind me, and the demon immediately rushed over to my female to dish lush vegetables onto her plate.

Kale, carrots, potatoes smothered in herbs and oil, tender turnips, and more.

Everything she enjoyed.

My female flushed, her cheeks darkening prettily, and thanked the demon profusely for his help.

I leaned back in my chair and scoffed, and she glanced at me, her eyes full of censure. That made me grin.

After we finished eating, I nodded at the servants to fill our glasses. They scurried over and did my bidding, and my female thanked them again.

“Their entire existence is to serve me. You do not need to thank the beings so far beneath you.”

I took a sip of wine to hide my smile, knowing such a statement would raise Cassandra’s ire and distract her from her *other* ill feelings.

She did not disappoint me.

Though she did not show fury in a way that was familiar. No, not my sweet witch.

She simply smiled stiffly before rising from her seat, as graceful as a goddess, her long, lean form showing her agitation in the tense set of her shoulders, in her rigid steps as

she strode over to the servants as they stood stiffly against the wall.

“Thank you. You’ve made my stay here so much better than I ever expected.”

The demons spluttered before bowing, and with a flick of my wrist, they raced through the recessed door leading to their quarters, fearful I would make them pay for Cassandra’s strange behavior.

She endeared me too much for that to happen.

And she would be most displeased if I punished the serving demons for her effusive gratitude.

When she settled in her seat again, I let her see my amusement, smiling wide and unabashed, allowing my sharp teeth to show through the glamor.

She giggled, a joyous sound that tightened a band around my heart. I rubbed it absentmindedly. No more pain. No more guilt.

For now, at least.

She gave me more of her joy each day, exposing her true face, the veil of her past lifting by increments, and it pleased me beyond measure.

“You did that on purpose.”

“I do everything with purpose.”

She hummed before returning to her meal, finishing it quickly, noises of pleasure escaping her whenever she ate

something she particularly enjoyed. As my cock hardened in interest and my eyes devoured her mouth, I filed the information away.

Serve more herb potatoes and turnips.

Her pleasure felt like my own, and I swallowed more wine to coat my parched throat.

After taking her last bite with relish, she nursed her water. Every time I offered her wine, she refused, saying it had no effect on immortals. Alcoholic beverages made by humans did not get us drunk, true, but as I told her, it was delicious.

I wanted to introduce her to all the flavors on Earth and Inferna until I found the one thing she craved above all others.

Internally, I grimaced.

What weakness had her presence injected me with?

She relaxed into the chair as she took her final sip, and I decided it was time to bare more to her... and hope it would not drive her away.

“I have something I must discuss with you,” I muttered.

It pained me that wariness crossed her face, but I hoped my honesty would ease her worries.

Especially because I could not be honest about everything.

Guilt threatened to choke me, and I chugged down the rest of the wine to rid myself of it.

Clearing my throat when that did not work, I said, “You know about demon matings because of the shifter who mated

your sister witch, I presume.”

Several months ago, Cassandra’s coven had requested assistance from Atticus. They believed a shifter male was possessed by a demon, one who meant a great deal to them. The Alpha of the pack in the northern tip of their territory and their closest ally. Perhaps more importantly, the mate of their air witch, Greer.

Of course, I knew it wasn’t a possession. Noam and Atticus explained to me that Colette had saved the male’s life during the battle with the demon-possessed warlock clan. She had a resurrection gift, one that *quite* intrigued me—something Noam noticed and over which he grew exceedingly aggressive until I promised not to *study* his sister—but it required a price. She could take the soul from one being and transfer it to another, which she did for Greer’s mate when he was mortally wounded in battle.

He had an echo of a demon within him, not a full possession.

Full possessions on Earth were nearly as uncommon as demons with their own physical form, such as myself.

Ephemeral demons could not get through pockets, nor was their magic powerful enough to *send* them through realms. They would disintegrate into nothing.

The coven killed most of the remaining ephemeral demons in the Earth realm. The others waited in Inferna for the moment the rift opened once more.

When Aleks began exhibiting strange symptoms, Atticus contacted me, and I gave them advice, receiving a vial of the shifter male's blood as payment.

While I collected blood with the intention of using it in an obscure spell to complete my task, I took the shifter male's blood as payment simply because it fascinated me.

Of course, in demonic texts, I had read of such healing powers, ones that created demon echoes or shadows. But I had never seen one with my own eyes.

Cassandra dipped her chin in acknowledgment, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“So, you know what will happen,” I continued.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Greer's heat came closer and closer together because she and Aleks didn't mate, and the demonic presence inside of him—“

“The demonic echo or shadow,” I interrupted.

She licked her bottom lip, and my eyes dropped to the now wet flesh. I wanted to suck it into my mouth. To run my tongue over the path hers took, to taste her flavor—

“The demonic echo or shadow,” she repeated, interrupting my lustful musings. “It... demanded the mating. It caused her beast to enter into the heat cycle more frequently until they gave in.”

A sweet scent permeated the air, and my nostrils flared.

Heated prickles followed it, covering every bit of my skin.

Was my timid witch... aroused?

And if she was, why could I scent her now?

Perhaps because she had access to her beast...

I would have to ponder this later.

Our conversation was too important.

Her face was so expressive as I gazed at her. Her forehead creased, lips pursing, a gleam of... guilt flashing in her eyes.

Instinct and endless observations of my female told me she wondered if mating me would change my mind about the rift.

I would not lie to her now.

There would be plenty of time for that later.

“I cannot promise that a mating between us would alter my plans,” I said softly. She squeezed her glass, her knuckles turning white, and I frowned. “What I can promise is that you will never be harmed, and I will ensure your coven and those you love are not as well.”

She met my eyes, hers boring into me. Now the little witch hoped to uncover all my secrets; if only she looked deep enough beneath my skin.

After a moment, she nodded. But she did not agree to mate me, which I had expected.

My female needed time.

I did not have much, but it would have to be enough.

And she needed *trust*.

I should have kept all my secrets. Even now, we could be mated.

That I could not remain silent showed how much Cassandra had... altered me in our brief time together.

When had I come to care for her near as much as my purpose?

Clearing my throat and dispelling the troubling question, I rose from my seat and said, "Let us train tonight."

Cassandra furrowed her brows at the abrupt transition, at my lack of demands upon her, but she agreed with a low murmur.

That night, under the stars, she called her beast.

It came easily, fangs flashing as they descended halfway down her chin. Claws sharp but petite, yet long enough to do great damage, as I had seen in the forest when I stroked my cock to the symphony of her violence.

Not much fur sprouted, perhaps because she was only half-shifter, but it spread over her arms and along her forehead like a crown denoting her connection to the Earth, a connection made stronger by her beast and magic.

She was magnificent as she threw back her head and roared in victory.

And when she smiled with joy after allowing the shift to recede, I yearned to rut her into the ground. To reward her triumph with cock and seed.

All thoughts of release disappeared when she struggled to call her witch magic. The shield came as though she had been born with it, as it always seemed to—my female did an excellent job with defensive magic—but none of her other gifts born of the Earth's power came forth.

Her crestfallen expression sent an arrow of discomfort through my chest.

Before our month ended, I would help her find this power.

I would not fail her.

Not in more ways than I already had.

CHAPTER 22

CASSANDRA

Raziel took me three weeks ago, and he still hadn't taken his payment in full. He never brought it up in the intervening days, and he'd only hinted at it when we discussed demonic matings.

It loomed in the background, but it wasn't a malevolent shadow over me. It had become a... possibility.

Despite his horrifying confession about the rift, I... trusted him.

I wish Greer was here to tell me how illogical that was. I also wished Colette was here to urge me to follow my heart.

I felt torn between what I wanted to believe and what pessimism and experience dictated.

Was it because of the mate bond? Did it muddle the mind so much that I would trust a demon who told me he wanted to destroy my realm by uniting it with his?

But... I was raised to believe the Goddess didn't make mistakes.

Even when I thought she did with Greer's mating, when Aleks rashly and idiotically rejected her out of a misguided need to protect her from his demonic shadow, it turned out the male, while dense, was perfect for her. That he gave her something she couldn't find with anyone else.

The same thing happened with all of my coven sisters. Their mates, including Makhi, a warlock, someone who should be our immortal enemy considering the centuries of animosity between our kinds, were perfect for them.

Makhi protected Letty, and she gave him peace and kindness.

Naiya tempered Fin's erratic nature, and he helped shoulder her burdens.

Toric didn't make Willow hide behind him, and she trusted herself as a warrior when she was with him.

And Aleks admired Greer, loved her for who she was, but also lent her his strength, so she never faltered. She made him a better male by challenging him.

So how could I look at Raziel and think the Goddess made a mistake with me?

Even when I lived through the dark days of my time in my father's pack, I trusted the Goddess.

She didn't do harm to me or anyone else.

Immortals and mortals alike had to make choices. We had evil and good within us. We had self-interest and selflessness within us. Disdain and empathy.

My father made his choice. The Goddess gave us powers, greeted us upon our deaths, and selected the mates meant for us—the other halves of the souls only she could see. She didn't make our choices for us. A mate could harm a mate because of those choices. A parent could reject a child. The witch Elders could betray their own kind for their selfish gain. The Goddess had nothing to do with it.

So now, even knowing Raziel's intentions, part of my trust in him came from my trust in the Goddess... and that part was unshakable.

But the bulk of it came from his treatment of me.

With every molecule of my being, I knew he would never harm me.

I made a deal with him. I owed him payment for that deal. He never said he would renege on his side of the bargain. In fact, he had started opening up to me about his plans for June, how he could use his powers to sneak through the Elders' protection spell to save her. After Naiya mated Fin, the Elders claimed she betrayed our kind for the fae—even though they set up her meeting with the former Blood King by inviting them to a witch challenge. When Nai returned to our realm, she confronted the Elders, killed their lackey—who happened to be the Blood Kingdom's Oracle, the female who set Fin on his path to Nai. Soon after, the Elders updated their protection spell to something none of us had ever seen. Even Fin couldn't breach it, and the fae were masters of travel between realms and spells. It made me wonder if Nai was sending her fae mate

around to search for me. Raziel scoffed when I told him that. He said there were so many protections against the fae in the demon realm, there was no way Fin could pass them.

He thought the fae were, essentially, *overrated*.

And that made me think the Elders were working with demons, that their protection spell contained demonic magic capable of barring the fae. When I brought it up to Raziel, he said it was likely.

So, even though I wasn't out hunting for answers, I was finding them just the same. I had so much to tell my coven sisters when I returned to them.

I should be glad, but the thought of going back to the compound made my chest tight.

I didn't want to leave Raziel.

He was... so much more than I expected.

He didn't take his payment from me because he saw what it would do to me.

Sure, when I arrived, I talked a big game to myself. That I was made for this task because I could disassociate from my body. *Nothing he does will be worse than what's already happened*, I'd foolishly thought, desperately clinging to any bravado I could muster.

That in and of itself showed how damaging it would be to be taken by Raziel when I couldn't bear to be fully present. When my mind had to drift away to protect itself.

And Raziel understood that before I did.

So... maybe I didn't need to be so hard on myself for trusting him.

We didn't have to say much to each other for me to get a sense of his character.

Calculating. Menacing. Surprisingly playful.

He had a thread of honor that ran deep and true, although I hadn't quite figured out the limits of it just yet.

I always thought it was funny how little Toric and Willow talked to each other. I mean... they probably opened up a lot more when they were in private, but they said so much through looks and body language. They didn't need to fill the silence with endless words to express their love for each other.

Not that I loved Raziel, or he loved me. But... I was learning how much could be said with few words.

I ran a finger over the stem of a drooping rose.

Raziel probably thought I liked roses most of all—he always brought me to this very spot when we came outside—but in all honesty, I had no preference. This bush felt... unhealthy, and I hoped a little attention would help it heal.

Self-disgust curdled in my stomach.

If only I could use my gift to do what other earth witches could, I'd heal it immediately.

I shook off the thought and returned my focus to my notebook. More symbols rushed through my mind, and I began

scratching at the pages. The notebook was almost full of my inane doodles, and the symbols floated into my mind less often, the urge to *write them down immediately* diminishing, so I hoped whatever this strange impulse would end soon.

It started before I reached immortal maturity. Symbols drawn in my blood after one of my father's males carved into my skin after—

I shuddered.

After.

It continued after I reached maturity, no longer my father's responsibility, finally free of him and his pack. I wondered why I saw them so clearly, why they demanded to be written. And I could never bring myself to mention it to my coven sisters.

But I was possessive of them. My own secret language, something that kept me somewhat intact when everything demanded I shatter completely.

And I worried Naiya would think I was even more broken than she had assumed and would sideline me even more.

I didn't blame her for her caution. She loved me. And she had far greater worries than my pride. If I couldn't hold my own, I was of little use.

I stopped questioning it. My little scribbles weren't hurting anyone, least of all me.

I paused as my inspiration slipped away, setting down the pencil for now. Risking a glance at Raziel, I remembered my

mother vehemently telling me that trust should be strong.

My father had broken her long before he broke me.

She never told me how they met, and he certainly wouldn't talk about it.

His pack was full of purists. Shifters who didn't believe in mating outside of shifters. Packs like that were few and far between, shifters the most likely of all immortals to mate with whoever they felt the bond with.

Whatever happened between my parents, my father and his pack were banished from our territory when I was young.

She used to let him come by the compound once a year to see me, not that I remembered much from those visits. My coven's mothers would talk in hushed tones. *Ezekiel is here*. I hated his name almost as much as his face. The sound of it—*Alpha Ezekiel*—portended pain.

During his infrequent visits, my sister witches would hide in their rooms. I remembered his frowning face, his stiff posture, but none of the words we spoke to each other left an impression.

But when he became violent with my mother, she and her coven decided it was enough. That he wasn't worthy of her or me.

Unfortunately, the Elders thought differently. They gleefully sent me to him. I wasn't sure if they knew what kind of male he was, but knowing how much they hated me and my coven sisters for our hybridity, I wouldn't doubt it.

After all, during the same challenge they invited Fin to, they'd extended an invitation to my father. When the Elders selected me to receive punishment for Colette using her resurrection gift to save her mate—something they'd decreed was against the balance of our kind, even though it was a Goddess-given power—my father crowed, amused that I would suffer. The Elders knew Letty would take any punishment to use her gift, so they decided to punish her sisters, recognizing she would not accept our pain as readily.

Greer stepped forward to take the punishment in my place, but my father's guffaws still echoed in my mind sometimes.

As a witchling, I didn't understand the depths of evil.

I wasn't a witchling anymore.

So in life, my mother believed trust could only survive if it was strong.

And I would have to test that theory, because even though I had faith in the Goddess, and it came naturally to me to believe in Raziel for a variety of reasons, the trust between us felt like walking along a precipice, or... a newly bloomed flower that could either grow stronger roots or float away in a strong breeze.

After his confession about the rift, I expected all the comfort his presence gave me to disappear like it never existed. It didn't.

I expected nightmares of blood.

A few weeks ago, that would've been what waited for me when I shut my eyes. But all I got were the symbols for my notebook.

And now those appeared to be done. My head was completely empty of them, and I let out a long, relieved breath. I looked over at Raziel.

He sat on a bench only ten feet away and had watched me the entire time.

His hot gaze caused uncomfortable pressure to swell in my core.

If Greer's experience was a pattern, I'd go into heat again soon because my mate hadn't claimed me. Would I still be here with him when that happened? Would the heat go away if it wasn't sated? Would the shorter cycles persist even if he wasn't present?

I needed a distraction before the pressure at my center pooled into needy interest that I couldn't relieve, not in my current frame of mind. Based on the chills I kept getting and the way my mouth filled with saliva every time I looked at Raziel, my heat would come fast and furious, negating all my questions.

I dug my hands into the dirt, shut my eyes, and called to the Earth's aura. I felt that now familiar strangeness, like a poorly sewn fabric with ridges of raised thread at the seams. I wondered if other pockets felt like this.

My power swirled around me, and I had the unshakable urge to embrace it like Raziel told me to.

So I did.

Wrapping the gossamer threads of power around me until they twisted together into warm ropes of energy that caressed my skin and organs and reached into my soul.

I didn't hear him approach, didn't know how close he was until I felt his breath touch the back of my neck. "You are doing so well, Cassandra," he purred, one hand pushing against my sternum, so I leaned into his back.

The words sent a shiver down my spine, and I flushed with pride.

"Keep going. Pull it to you. You are the master of your power. Take what is your due." I bit my lip until I tasted blood, seeking the power, trying to direct it, but nothing happened.

Just as I started to give up, Raziel growled and cursed. He tore his hand away from me, and my back lost the heat of his chest.

It destroyed my focus, the power melting back to its source, and I twisted to look at him.

He'd been kneeling right behind me, but he jumped to his feet, cursed again, and wrapped shadows around himself.

In the next breath, he was gone.

Disappointment slumped my shoulders, and I started to remove my fingers from the dirt, but a spark lit right behind

my sternum.

Resolve.

I'm doing this.

Gritting my teeth, I dug deep in the dirt, pulling the power tight around me, demanding it to create life.

Warmth surged in my fingers, and my eyes popped open to find...

A little seedling sprouting.

I let the magic slip away. I didn't need to push it, to see how much it could do.

I smiled until my cheeks strained.

This was enough.

Raziel was right.

My magic created life.

Not like Letty... this was something all my own.

And I needed to show him. To thank him for giving me this gift. For helping me find it.

I rushed inside, first looking in the kitchen, where we spent most of our time together—something that warmed me, since the kitchen was the heart of my coven compound, too—before racing to his room.

Raziel and I didn't use any of the other rooms in the house, and I avoided the indoor garden and its miserable plants. I tried to give him pointers on how best to treat indoor plants,

and he cut me off, insisting I could move them outside if I so desired.

And I absolutely intended to before I left.

I burst through the door to his bedroom, eager to tell him what I had done, but my feet skidded to a halt when I saw him.

He was hunched over, every muscle tight, his glamor obliterated... and he was completely nude.

Thick muscles on display. Wide shoulders. Tapered waist. Strong thighs.

And he had one hand wrapped around his brutally hard cock, stroking violently, squeezing the flushed tip that had... protrusions circling it like an erotic crown.

“Goddess,” I mumbled. His face whipped in my direction, his expression one of desperation. “You’re in rut.”

CHAPTER 23

CASSANDRA

“Obviously,” Raziel said between pants.

His hand didn't stop its rapid motion, and I watched raptly as the protrusions on his cock flared on each upstroke.

I licked my lips, and he groaned long and low. “You torment me, female.” I tore my gaze away from his shaft and met his eyes. His full lips were parted, neck corded with tense muscles, forehead beading with sweat. As it dripped over his eyebrows, he wiped it away with the back of his free hand. “So sweet,” he panted. “Beautiful. Powerful, though you still do not recognize it.” A shudder rolled over him, and my breathing picked up. “*Mine.*”

I dropped my eyes again, and Raziel growled, a dominant, rattling sound that went straight between my thighs.

I was far too intrigued by him, by this, to be afraid, and I didn't want to ruin the moment when it was so fucking *exhilarating* to be filled with desire.

Raz needed me... and I wanted to be what he needed.

But I didn't want to drift away.

I wasn't ready to have sex with him, and the times in the past when we'd tried to do it played in my mind, making it even harder to step over that line.

If I flinched, he would stop.

If I disconnected, he would stop.

His care for me... it was unlike anything I'd ever known from a male.

Sure, Noam was kind to me, and we grew up together, but my... intimate encounters with males were always pain.

Worse, my body betrayed me every time.

Even as I lay cut up on the ground, bruised, bones broken, my mind drifting away as my body was violated, my body turned against me.

I got wet.

I eased the way for my rapists.

Fuck, that word was a kick to my sternum.

I swallowed and squeezed my eyes shut.

Rapists.

So many of them pushing themselves inside me while my mind floated away and my body... my body made it easier for them.

If I was an optimist, I'd be glad for that... wetness.

They didn't tear me, at least... not *there*.

Just everywhere else, gouging my stomach and arms and chest and legs and back and ass with their claws.

Biting my inner thighs.

Even the top of my feet until bone crunched.

Just ripping apart my heart and mind and soul.

But not *there*.

There welcomed them.

I'd come back to my body when my... my rapists removed themselves.

Leaving even more wetness behind.

Sickening, vomit-inducing *wetness*.

And I'd face the greatest horror of all.

The lingering clenches of orgasm.

My body was my worst enemy.

It paved the way, and it *enjoyed* the violation.

How could I experience pleasure with Raz when I experienced it with *them*?

But... I *did*.

He touched me in all the places they cut and tore and ripped and bit, and it didn't sicken me.

It felt... *beautiful*.

He covered me in *his* wetness, and it didn't repulse me.

Because... because he only did what I asked him to do.

My beast dropped my instinctive aversion to physical contact with a male, but my mind—*I*—was right there with it, and he respected my wishes. All he did was make me feel good.

He protected me from my beast when it demanded more.

He stopped because I asked him not to go all the way, even though the desire to fuck is ingrained in fated mates, because he didn't want to hurt any part of me. He didn't want me to regret it.

Every single male who violated me should've done the same. They should've stopped when I said stop. They shouldn't have continued as I begged for it to end. They shouldn't have forced themselves on me when I drifted away to protect myself.

That was basic decency.

"I..." I swallowed, trying to moisten my parched throat.

Raziel stopped his furious pumping, squeezing once before relinquishing his swollen cock. A rumble built in his chest, but he suppressed it, the strain of fighting his desires evident in how long it took for him to get control. "There is nothing you need to do, Cassandra. Go to your room. When I... finish, I will come to you. You will see I am hale."

I clenched my hands hard enough for my nails to cut crescents into my palms, the sting welcome. He needed to understand.

I *needed* him to understand.

“When the males... r-raped me, I...” Tears burned my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. “I-I orgasmed.”

Raziel went preternaturally still. He didn't even look like he was breathing. Shame made my stomach lurch.

He's disgusted with you. You're filthy. Depraved—

“Cassandra,” he breathed. He reached for his shirt, pinning it with his hands so that it covered his cock, but he was so hard his flesh defied gravity, pointing straight ahead, and a totally inappropriate giggle almost broke out of me when I looked at the tented fabric.

He looked down and grinned ruefully. Then his eyes hardened. “You must know... our bodies respond to stimuli, sweet witch.” He gulped, his eyes glazing over for a moment before snapping back to my face. “My sister... the Princess of Lust... she would test me and our brother. She has the power to physically manipulate beings and would pin us to the bed with it, touching our...” He let out a disgusted sound. “She never... took us, not then, but she would use her powers of lust while cutting us to see how loud we screamed or how much she could make us bleed while we... responded, only stopping when the queen demanded it. Not because our mother cared about *what* she did.” His jaw worked for a moment before he continued. “She wanted us to be useful, and two young demons, not yet immortal, injured and bleeding, could not be useful.”

My lips parted as an ache bloomed in my chest, empathy for the youngling he'd been and all he'd suffered—not just by his sister's hands, but the neglect from his mother, the female who should've protected him above all others. Had my mother been alive, my father would've never gotten near me. If he did... if he'd harmed me while she still lived, my mother would've eviscerated him. All younglings deserved to be protected.

“I'm so sorry,” I rasped, the words so inadequate, I cringed. “I can't even imagine... my mother was... I never doubted her love for me. I had her for a short time, but those years were full of affection and laughter, and everything a youngling should have.” A laughed, a sad little sound. “I guess it was hard to appreciate with everything that happened after, but I should've.” Running a hand over his thigh in a soothing gesture, I stared into his dark eyes tinged with painful memories. “You should've had that kind of love.”

He shook his head. “This... this is not about me. I have long been stronger than my sister, and I delighted in proving just that, so that she would know she could *never* torment me again. My brother had far more difficulties, perhaps because of his nature. Yet our friendship remained steadfast. I did not want to leave him in Inferna, but he was happy to see me gone. To see me free of all that plagued us.” He ran a finger over my jaw. “I was not alone, my sweet witch. But... you must know that your body did nothing but what was natural. It did not happen to me, but Chaos...” He grimaced. “For some, the stimulation causes such a response, even as their mind and soul reject the advance. It is *not* a failing of yours. It is a

failing of all those who harmed you for their own pleasure. Who took what was not theirs to claim.”

I wanted to sob, not because I believed him—I wasn’t sure if I did, if I *could*—but because *he* truly believed what he said.

“I will not fuck you, Cassandra. Not until you desire it. This, I vow.”

“I know,” I whispered thickly. He didn’t have to say it. He’d never shown me anything different.

I felt raw, exposed, vulnerable.

But there was a spark, like the one I felt when I made the seedling grow.

And that... that felt like power.

That power came from how much my male needed me.

Incongruously, other than the deal and Raziel spiriting me away, just about everything we’d done had been my choice.

Well, the demon hunt had been a surprise, but I agreed to training, and his unorthodox method worked.

And now... now I wanted to give him everything. I wanted to love everything he gave me.

So. Fucking. Badly.

So I made a decision.

“Sit.”

Raziel’s nostrils flared. “Do not be stupid, female. Run,” he gritted out.

I shook my head as I went to him. Thankfully, he was close to the bed, and as I approached, he backed up on his own. When the back of his legs hit the mattress, I simply pressed my palms against his chest and pushed.

I couldn't make him sit, but he wanted this just as badly, so he didn't put up much resistance.

“You should run.”

As I lowered myself onto my knees, I murmured, “I'm tired of running.”

After that burst of bravery, my hesitation returned as I took in the state of his arousal. His cock reached his naval, as thick as my wrist, the protrusions flaring every so often. It was intimidating and beautiful at the same time.

“Why am I not scared of it?” I whispered to myself.

“Because you know I will not use it as a weapon against you.”

I snapped my face up to meet his eyes, and they were soft, intent on me. I licked my lips and nodded. “That must be it.”

I dropped my gaze again, this time tentatively reaching out to touch him, but I stopped about an inch from his flesh. “What are these?”

A rumble built in his throat. “My mating barbs.”

Heat rose from my throat to my cheeks, but I pushed aside my embarrassment and asked, “What do they do... if they're in someone's mouth?”

His breaths stalled before picking up, followed by a low groan that sounded more miserable than turned on. “You would... feel them, but they do not behave as they would inside a female.”

I swallowed hard and finally wrapped my hand around his shaft. His stomach clenched, and a growl trickled from his mouth. He kept his hands fisted at his sides, his frame vibrating with his effort to keep in control.

My breathing increased to match his as I slid my fingers down the surprisingly silky skin.

“What do they do... inside a female?” I asked in a voice full of gravel.

My fingers continued to stroke up and down in exploration.

Raziel didn't seem to mind my tentative touches. His hips bucked as though it was the greatest pleasure he'd ever experienced.

“They flare, locking me inside,” he rasped.

I slid my hand down so I could feel the heavy weight of his balls. The skin there was even softer than his cock, and my lips parted in surprise. Finally, his words penetrated my brain. “Like a knot,” I mumbled.

That should terrify me. I'd been forced to take so many knots, although I didn't remember most of them.

The first time, I blacked out from the agony.

Never once had I gone through a heat while with my father. Only mature shifters did. I wasn't ready for a knot. An innocent virgin who, up until that moment, dreamed of finding a mate who'd take me sweetly. I'd fantasized about a shifter mate, about the connection being knotted would forge between us.

After... I never wanted a shifter anywhere near me, let alone inside me.

But Raziel's barbs were somehow less intimidating.

They were almost... cute.

And that thought almost made me giggle, but I managed to hold back.

Now wasn't the time to laugh. Even I knew that.

He groaned when I ran my fingers over them. They were soft, flexible.

Definitely not as scary as they looked.

My core wasn't scared at all. It clenched rhythmically at the thought of taking them inside me. How they'd feel like tiny fingers brushing along my walls.

A chill peppered my skin, and I clenched my teeth. My heat would no doubt come soon... but it wasn't here yet, and I could explore him with a clear head, without the beast altering my perception.

Niggling doubt crept into the back of my mind.

Sex had never been enjoyable for me. Why would it be now?

But I set it aside. We weren't having sex today. And whatever Raziel did to me, he would try his hardest to make sure I enjoyed it.

Of that, I have no doubt.

I wrapped my hand more tightly around him, ready to stroke him hard and fast like I had seen him doing, when he cupped his hand over mine.

I looked at him, my focus on the tense lines around his mouth as it moved. "Get it wet." When I hesitated, he elaborated. "Spit on it," he husked.

Slowly, I released him. Indecision warred inside me. I had never done anything like this before, and the desire to see it through to the end, to see his pleasure, won out.

Scooting closer to him, he widened his thighs to accommodate me. As my mouth came closer to his cock, I inhaled, taking in the scent of my aroused male. It set my nerves ablaze, the apex of my thighs growing slicker.

"Are you alright, female?" he asked gently.

I didn't realize how much I needed that reassurance, the confirmation that he cared about what I felt, until the relief flooded me, and I had to grip his thighs to keep myself upright.

"Yes," I murmured, straightening my spine bit by bit.

Then I bent my head and swirled my tongue around his barbs.

They soft, thin filaments tickled, and I giggled as I licked again.

Raziel made a choked sound, and I pulled back, startled. “A-am I doing it right?”

He threaded fingers through my hair, not directing, just holding, and I leaned my cheek into his palm.

“Nothing you do to me is wrong.”

I searched his face for a moment, taking in his parted lips, the sweat shining on his dark skin, and the tense muscles around his eyes.

Then I lapped at him some more.

I closed my mouth, letting it fill with saliva—which was easy to do, considering how much I salivated when I looked at Raziel’s muscular chest and defined stomach. When I opened my lips, the spit leaking onto the bulbous tip of his cock, flowing through the barbs until it ran down the side of his shaft like another set of throbbing veins.

He moaned, his eyes rolling as he tipped his head back, exposing his strong throat that bobbed as he swallowed.

I slicked the saliva all over his cock and started stroking.

“Squeeze me harder.” The words were a demand, but they came out like a plea.

Feminine triumph fluttered in my stomach.

I bit my lip and followed his instructions.

Every so often, I spat on his cock again—which inspired guttural groans from deep in Raziel’s chest, that noise settling in the cradle of my thighs—and I swirled my tongue around his barbs, never letting up on the movements of my hand.

And every so often, nerves skittered up my spine. I’d pause, and Raziel’s concerned gaze would drop to my face, searching... searching.

He was so in tune with me, I couldn’t imagine how much closer we’d be if we mated.

Our connection grounded me in the present, in the *beauty* of giving him pleasure.

In the *power* of choosing to give it to him.

And the nerves would dissipate, leaving only *him* and the hot, heavy pressure in my core.

The muscles in his thigh and stomach hardened more and more, until he finally let out a choked roar and cum spurted from the tip, coating my hand and smoothing my strokes along his fat shaft, lubricating his flesh and my palm as I kept up my motions, watching raptly as more seed leaked. As the last shudder rolled through him, I licked him one more time, curious about the taste of his essence.

It exploded on my tongue, sweet and bitter, like life itself.

Raziel was coated in a sheen of sweat, and his chest rose and fell with his rapid breaths.

He was... majestic like this. Unapologetically primal, male.

I sat back on my heels and watched as he regained his faculties. When he did, he stared at me like I was the only creature in existence.

Instead of lifting me up, Raziel slid off the bed and mirrored my position, kneeling in front of me.

Then he cupped my cheeks and slammed our mouths together before I could let out a startled gasp.

He ate at my mouth, angling my face so he could stroke his tongue along mine, perfectly aligning us so we fit like a key and lock.

I threw my arms around his neck and pushed my chest against his, needing to be closer to him.

He sucked my bottom lip before giving it a nip, and I moaned as he covered my mouth again, one hand tightening in my hair, the other sliding down to grip my nape and hold me in place for his sensual assault.

Nothing had ever felt this good.

Not even the orgasms he gave me during my heat.

I darted my tongue around his, and he tamed my unpracticed motions with tender swirls and sucks.

When he groaned and it vibrated in my mouth, I moaned in return.

Slowly, our kiss softened, his lips brushing against me. Close-mouthed, gentle, reverent.

He pulled back and opened his eyes, his lids hooded.

Mine fluttered closed as I bent toward him again, wanting more of his kiss.

“Let me pleasure you,” he muttered against my mouth. “Let me taste you. *Please.*”

I nearly said no out of instinct, not wanting to be so vulnerable and exposed, not when my beast wasn't there to banish my fears... but the *please* shot adrenaline into my bloodstream.

“Okay,” I murmured, and he pressed a kiss at the corner of my mouth.

Surprisingly, he didn't move us to the bed.

“Put your hands behind your head,” he rasped.

It took me a beat to process his command, and he rumbled in demand.

I slowly lifted my arms and clasped my hands behind my head.

And I gasped when Raziel began lightly tracing my scars.

His dark fingers roved over the ones crisscrossing my chest, smoothed over the ones on my stomach.

Then his mouth followed the same path, and tears burned my eyes.

“Raziel,” I whispered brokenly. He looked up at me, his eyes hooded and dark. But he didn't stop kissing and licking each mark. “Please don't betray me.”

“I will *never* hurt you.”

Peace. This is what peace feels like.

When he'd kissed every scar he could reach, he helped me stand on my trembling legs. Tears streamed down my face, but he ignored them as he lavished the marks on my thighs. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pressed his cheek against the curve of my stomach.

“Beautiful,” he muttered as he kissed my navel. “So fucking beautiful.”

Incandescent emotion turned my body leaden, and I had to lower my arms, had to delve my fingers through his coily hair. When he rested his chin on my stomach and stared up at me, I could've sworn his eyes were bright with unshed tears.

He shut them, nuzzling his face into my skin.

Our breathing was the only sound interrupting us, my tears drying up as pure, satisfying joy swelled in my heart.

He didn't seem to want to break the moment, but urgency took over me, and I knelt in front of him again, running my hands over his shoulders, stroking his muscular chest, thumbs grazing over his small brown nipples. When I bent to show my appreciation for his scars, he gripped my chin, lifted my face, and kissed me.

Slow. Deep. Soft.

Every lick of his tongue tasted of his need to join our lips, so I worshipped his scars with my hands, hoping he could feel their beauty in my eyes through my touch.

When I reached the indent of his hips, he groaned savagely and lifted me into his arms as he fluidly rose to his feet, laying me on the bed with my legs dangling, before lowering himself to the floor between my splayed thighs.

“Put the pillow under your head,” he said in gruff demand. “I want you to watch me the entire time. So you know who is licking this pretty pussy.”

I shivered, my nipples tightening at the image he painted, Need burned hot behind my navel, sending tingles to my extremities and between my thighs.

And I followed his instructions.

He pulled my pants off, followed swiftly by my panties, and spread my thighs to accommodate his broad shoulders.

For a moment, fear unfurled in my stomach, but he muttered, “Watch me,” and desire smothered it.

When he lowered his head until it was inches from where my need coalesced, he took a deep breath and rumbled in approval. “You are my sweet witch in every way, are you not?”

I could only moan, because he chose that exact moment to swipe his tongue from my entrance to my clit.

And I kept my eyes on him as he sucked and licked and nipped and groaned like it was the greatest ecstasy of his life to feast between my thighs.

All I saw was his face... his dark eyes smoldering as they drifted from my mouth to my heaving chest. All I felt was the

pinch of his fingers holding my thighs open, the press of his shoulders against my knees, the slick of his tongue as he devoured me.

And when I tipped over into bliss, he never let up, licking me until the sounds from his tongue and my flesh made sloppy-wet sounds in the room.

I opened my mouth in a silent scream, the muscles in my neck straining, but I never took my eyes off his face.

As the aftershocks rocked my body, I kept my gaze on him.

The pink of his tongue as it swirled. The curve of his lips as he smiled, so pleased with himself. His gaze full of possession and... happiness.

And when the doubts started to creep in, Raziel pulled away, licking his glistening lips and stroking my thighs. "You did so well, Cassandra. Beautiful. What a good female you are. Did you enjoy it? Do you love when your male makes you come?"

I reached for him with trembling hands, and he came to me, laying on his side and pulling me against him, brushing tender kisses over my throat and cheek and temple, finally kissing me deeply so I tasted the pleasure he gave me. A tear slipped from my eye, and he kissed it away, too.

"I loved it," I whispered in his neck, the words slurred. "I loved it."

"I will give you more, whenever you desire. However much you desire," he whispered fervently in mine.

And as I drifted off to sleep, I didn't dream of blood.

Only him.

CHAPTER 24

RAZIEL

I slumped in the chair and stared at the corpse laying on the table, imbued with my communication spell.

The spell itself was easy enough, but it took ages to construct, to carve into the wood. And it required much sacrifice in blood and bone. Most demons did not have such patience or skill, so few devices existed that could communicate between realms.

It took me several decades to construct mine. It took longer to create the one Lust now used, a project I completed before leaving Inferna so long ago. So many years, I could not remember their number.

As the blood began to drip off the edge, the surface appeared above the corpse, and Lust's warped visage appeared.

"I received the queen's *urgent* message." The chiming of the ceremonial bowl woke me from my slumber, and I could not keep the irritation from my tone. The queen, using the princess

as her vessel because she could not deign to speak to her son, showed the patience of a youngling, stating Lust would await my call, which should occur *immediately*.

Weariness weighed upon my shoulders. I had long lost any affection I once had for my blood relations, but the demons of Inferna were an entirely different circumstance.

My family had been the ruling force in the realm for millennia, from the time my kind broke with the angels so long ago.

They deserved my consideration, even if seeing my *sister* in any capacity infuriated and disgusted me.

But when Lust replied, she shocked me to my core.

I could not make out her expression through the surface of the spell, not fully, but her words were... somber. Completely unlike her. "The queen is not happy, Raziel." That there was no seduction in her tone jolted me, and I sat up straighter, unease twisting my stomach. "Inferna is crumbling. We can no longer grow food. The last of the crops rotted away. Demons are beginning to... rebel." The fear threaded in her voice turned my blood to ice.

"How can this be?" I asked in disbelief. "When last I was there—"

Lust's bark of laughter cut me off. "You have not been home in centuries, Raziel. You do not know. You *cannot* know. Too busy wandering about with the *Earth immortals*," she spat. "And Mother... our queen... it is difficult for her to

admit things have declined so much. She will not voice her concerns, so she leaves it to me to ensure you *know* and will *act* in the manner a Prince of Inferna should.”

As I sat back in the chair, my heart raced. There was no doubt in my mind that the queen would ignore such things. She was stubborn, sure of her rule, and an inability to admit defeat was ingrained in her.

I flexed and clenched my fingers before clearing my throat. “What is to be done?”

Lust released an aggrieved breath. “You must complete your task.”

“I will,” I gritted out.

“*Quickly*. If you do not, *everyone* will die. It may not happen tomorrow, or even soon, but it *will* happen. You must do your duty.” She paused, and I made out her hand scrubbing down her face. The movement made the surface ripple violently for a moment before settling again. “Our kind needs time to settle on Earth. To prepare. And we cannot do this unless the rift is *open*.”

This time, she ended the call before I could get in another word. I sat in a daze of uncertainty and fury, unsure how much time had passed, only that it was enough for the darkness to turn to dawn, light filtering into the room.

I felt... helpless. Desperate.

And I did not like it.

I did not do well when my choices were limited.

Being torn asunder by competing interests. Competing needs.

But I knew what I must do. And knowledge consumed me, enraged me, until my mixed emotions settled into impotent despair.

With a mighty roar, I rose from my seat and flipped the table. It cracked, but that was not enough. I kicked and tore at it until shards of wood covering the corpse of the demon whose sacrifice resulted in the news that would change everything between me and my female.

But I was not satisfied with the destruction.

With a bellow, I lifted the chair and threw it at the window behind me, swinging it in a long arc, powered by my desperate and useless anger. Glass rained down on the wood floor.

The rage slipped away, only to be replaced by grief. I stumbled to the door, but I did not open it. I leaned my shoulder against it and took several deep breaths, trying to calm my erratic heart.

When the grief mingled with my growing resolve, I straightened my spine.

Cracking my neck, I closed my eyes, willing the grief and sorrow away, filling myself with duty.

I wanted Cassandra.

I wanted her *forever*.

But how could my mate, a female I had only known for a few short weeks, compare to the duty beaten into me since I was a youngling? The responsibility to the demons of Inferna?

Even to my own mother?

I made a disgusted sound.

No, this had nothing to do with the queen, nor my siblings. My commitment to Cassandra far outweighed any to my pestilent family.

But the denizens of Inferna...

Whatever I felt for my sweet witch, it could not compare to what I owed my kind.

I would lose everything.

But my kind... my kind would survive, even if I shredded my soul to ensure it.

CHAPTER 25

CASSANDRA

Training was brutal the next few days.
I relished it.

I felt stronger, physically and mentally.

I even asked Raziel for new clothes. Nothing like Eva would wear—I doubted I'd ever feel content in her form-fitting dresses and incredibly high heels. But I liked the tighter but comfortable leggings he brought me. Since I didn't bring a wardrobe with me, the pajamas Raziel provided on my first night here had already gotten me used to shirts in my size.

I loved that he didn't treat me like spun glass, even as he showed me a tenderness I never would've expected from a demon.

He wouldn't betray me if he felt half of what I did, and when I caught him watching me, I knew he felt *even more*.

He didn't take what he'd promised to when we made our deal, even as he insisted he'd keep his end of the bargain at the end of my time with him.

And I'd started to become... morose over that end date as it closed in on us.

We needed to talk about the *after*, because it was fast approaching.

Which was my plan for today.

Because somewhere between him bringing out my beast and loving my scars, I made a decision.

I wanted the bond.

No matter what.

No matter if my coven didn't approve.

It was a purely selfish choice, and I didn't feel even a bit of guilt over it.

He was *made* for me. Me alone.

We belonged together.

The Goddess decreed it, but it went beyond that.

Less than a week, and I'd be free of this place. June would be free of her prison.

And I found I didn't want to be.

I'd never felt more free than I did with the demon who kept me in a windowless and doorless room.

I didn't think I'd ever have a completely healthy view of sex and relationships, but over the days since my heat, since I... pleased him, I felt my arousal rise, and it didn't sicken me.

Greer would probably have some sort of theory on why—if she knew about my issues, that is—but it seemed she'd rubbed off on me, because I came up with one of my own as I lay in bed the night before.

I couldn't separate my mind and body during my heat.

The beast kept me present, even as it took control.

As Raziel heaped pleasure on me, as he soothed the ache deep in my core again and again, he never overstepped my boundaries.

And at the height of my need... I wished he had.

But he didn't, and it...

Well, it didn't magically heal my metaphorical wounds.

But it felt like some of them had started scabbing over.

For a while, I couldn't figure out if it was because of something Raziel had done.

Then I realized the obvious.

It was because *I* controlled our encounters.

Raz was the most powerful being I'd ever met, much stronger and fiercer than the abhorrent males of my father's pack.

And he capitulated to me.

I knew he could make me do anything he wanted... and he never did.

And that... *that* was power. My power.

I felt more connected to him than anyone in my life in those moments, like at the peak of my orgasm, he saw into my soul, and I saw into his.

It was... beautiful.

In truth, he'd given me more beauty than I'd ever encountered, ever thought I deserved, enough that it almost hurt to remember those precious moments, like they shouldn't exist for living things contained by fallible flesh.

And it wasn't just the pleasure he'd given me.

He treated me gently but, at the same time... not at all. He pushed me in ways that would empower me.

Strengthening my magic, my connection to my beast, couldn't benefit him as much as it did me.

He did this... for me.

He didn't let me retreat, but sometimes, when I was at my limit, he gave me space. He understood the need for balance to keep me comfortable, but also the need to push me so that I could be better. So that I could believe I was strong. Far stronger than my coven ever believed I was.

I wasn't angry with them for that. I hadn't shown them any different.

They loved me, so they tiptoed around my... issues.

Raziel cared about me, so he pushed me beyond my limits, but in a way that didn't threaten to send me into a spiral.

And I always found him watching me like I was a rare jewel and a confusing riddle wrapped in one.

I didn't mind. I watched him, too. I hid under the curtain of my hair less often because I enjoyed looking at him.

His heavy-lidded eyes. The sharp planes of his face. His dark curls. His big hands, powerful arms, strong chest. Every part of him compelled me to *watch*, to soak him in.

I'd been afraid of desire for so long, it took me a while to realize how much I *desired* him.

But now it was easy to identify... I felt it constantly, an ache that never went away, an anxious pressure demanding I stay near him.

The longing to connect with him in every way.

And I liked his eyes on me.

He made me want to be impulsive. Reckless.

And my trust solidified when he told me he wouldn't betray me.

I took him at his word. He'd never given me a reason not to.

Sure, our relationship started in an... unorthodox way, but the intervening weeks showed me who he truly was.

It didn't mean he was perfect. He had a core of malice alongside his kindness and his playfulness and his calculating nature.

But it just drew me to him even more.

His layers intrigued me.

They thrilled the female part of me that wanted the type of male who would ruthlessly destroy any impediment in our path.

Who'd protect me with a ferocity that would bring down the realms themselves.

He wouldn't have looked at me as he did if he wasn't full of his own complexities.

So that night, I turned to him and asked, "Can we... try again?"

We were in my room because he knew I liked to spend time in the quiet space. It felt almost like a pocket within the pocket, away from any distractions. Sometimes, we sat quietly together for hours. Me, writing in my notebook, although I hadn't had the urge to in the last few days. All the while, he would trace my every move with his hot gaze.

The air would thicken with tension—not the unwelcome kind I always felt when my coven had meetings to discuss our plans of attack, but a sweet tension that had a sharp edge, like nails scraping along skin.

Anticipation.

I was coming to realize it was just as good as release.

Now, though, Raziel's forehead creased in confusion.

"Try what?"

I squirmed and looked everywhere but at him.

He rumbled, and I knew he figured out what I wanted when he narrowed his darkening eyes. “Are you certain?”

I shivered a little as another chill racked my frame. They were coming more frequently.

“My heat is coming soon. I can feel it. I... want to do this without the heat.”

“Female...”

I sucked in a breath and held out a hand to stop his denial. “I want to do it. I want to do it without the heat. You’re my mate, the only being I would *ever* want this with, the only one who makes me... not fear it. And it still might not work. I might not be ready. But we won’t know unless we try. And doing it during the heat... it’s kind of cheating. My beast lowers my inhibitions. I...” I gulped, twinges of embarrassment fluttering in my stomach. “I ache for you. I desire you. And... I want to try.”

His eyes roamed over my face, searching, as they always did.

Whatever he was looking for, he must’ve found it. He dipped his chin in agreement. “If at any point—“

“I’ll tell you to stop.”

He rumbled. “You may not. But I will keep a close eye on you. I will not take you if you are no longer with me.”

My heart tripped over itself as tears swam in my eyes, but I didn’t let them fall. The tender feelings he inspired sat beside

my need for the male in front of me. Without one, the other would not be enough to overcome my fears.

“I know you won’t. I trust you.”

Something flashed over his face, an expression I couldn’t identify, but then he bent his head and brushed his lips against mine. It wasn’t a kiss, more of a caress, a comfort.

“I do not deserve you.”

I laughed softly as we fell back on the bed, him at my side, one hand cupping the side of my neck, warm and soothing. I pressed a kiss against the hollow of his throat. “No one deserves anyone.” I slid a hand into his curls, sifting my fingers through them. He leaned into my touch, a contented sound vibrating in his throat. “Only we can make a choice to give ourselves to others. Deserving has little to do with it.”

He laughed softly. “You are wise, sweet witch, but *deserving* has everything to do with it.”

I smiled just as softly. “Maybe you’re right. If that’s the case, you *do* deserve me, because only I can decide who does.”

He slid his thumb along my jaw, back and forth, before kissing me gently. His next words sent a thrill of heat between my thighs.

“Then let me give you everything.”

CHAPTER 26

RAZIEL

She was magnificent.

Even though I always intended to bring down the walls hiding her true face, I was not prepared for its glory.

Cassandra no longer hid behind her hair. Her shoulders rarely hunched, and her once-drawn face glowed, a beckoning light that could cut through the darkest night.

Her halting request showed how far she had come to accept her desires.

And guilt nearly swallowed me whole.

Did I accept my duty and take what she offered, or did I give my mate the whole truth before taking that step?

As she tugged at the placket of my slacks until my cock sprang free and kissed along my chin, I fell into a haze of desire.

Her heat neared, and my urge to mate rose with it.

Soon, I would be in rut to match her need, and there would be no time for questions.

“Cassandra,” I said on a groan as she wrapped a soft hand around my cock and caressed.

“Please, Raz. Please,” she murmured between kissing my throat, her little tongue darting out to taste.

I groaned louder and cupped her chin, raising her face to take her mouth. I licked at her lips, in the heated interior, and she stroked her tongue along mine. The kiss was slow, deep, consuming, making my heart kick and balls throb.

It was both euphoric and unpleasant. Never before had my *heart* involved itself in bedding females.

Every sensation felt like *more* because of it. The feel of her skin dripped pleasure from my cock and expanded my chest with tenderness. Her kiss made my barbs flare even as a softer warmth spread within me.

I did not know what to make of it, but it felt so good I did not care.

I gripped a chunk of her hair to angle her for my assault, and she moaned softly.

Then I snapped.

I had her short torn to shreds in the next moment. It hung on her in rags, and I pushed those off of her, needing to see every inch of her.

Smooth brown skin. Darker brown nipples. The gentle curve of her stomach. The graceful line of her collarbone.

I licked and sucked a path down her throat and over all the flesh I had exposed until I had to kneel to reach more. Grabbing her hips, I pulled her closer to me so I could take one of her aroused nubs in my mouth, teasing her, her flavor exploding on my tongue.

She *was* sweet everywhere.

I kept my eyes on her face, watching. If she slipped away... I would stop.

Even if I had to cut off my cock.

I listened to every desperate sound of arousal, knowing she wanted this as much as me.

Kissing down the line of her stomach, I reached her pants, the fabric soft against my chin.

I needed them off of her... *now*.

With shaking hands, I rolled them down her legs, Cassandra assisting me by lifting her feet when the fabric reached her ankles, kicking it off, baring herself to me.

She panted, her breasts trembling with each breath. I slid a hand between them. "Are you well?"

She sucked in air and bit her lip. "I..."

I stroked down the same path, dipping a fingertip in her navel, before skating my hand up to her throat. "What is it?"

“I didn’t expect it to be so... hot.” I grinned, and she squirmed, her little fists clenched. “I mean... me being undressed, and you... still dressed.”

Heated prickles danced over my skin, and my nostrils flared, absorbing the scent of her arousal as it permeated the room. “You will be the end of me, witch,” I rasped as I rose to my feet and embraced her.

She whimpered, and I frantically searched her face.

Her eyes were alight with passion, cheeks flushed, lips parted. “What is it?”

Her throat bobbing drew my gaze, and when I caught her eyes again, she bent her head to brush a kiss on my mouth. As we pulled apart, she whispered, “Your clothes... feel good against me.”

A shudder rolled through me, and I lay her on the bed, taking in the sight of her long, dark hair flowing over the pillow.

So beautiful.

“My skin will feel better,” I said gruffly as I began unbuttoning my shirt. Ripping it off my arms, it fluttered to the floor with her discarded garments. I tore my slacks off next, and in my eagerness, they caught on my shoes. With a grunt, I kicked them off, my remaining clothes with them.

I kneeled on the bed and went to my female.

“If I fuck you... I will claim you.” The words came out low and choppy, and I cleared my throat. “But for demons, you

must mate me, as well, and Cassandra—“ I gripped her chin and tilted her face so she met my eyes. “You do not have to. No matter what I do. The bond will not be complete without your intent to make it so.”

Her eyes were luminous in the dark, power breaking through them and bathing my skin. I had seen her coven sisters’ power in their eyes—fierce, right—and my female’s was soft, gentle, like candlelight. Like her.

“I planned to tell you... that’s what I want,” she whispered. “I want you to make me yours.”

My frame vibrated with the need to *claim*, but my heart and soul demanded I nurture her in this moment. I lay at her side, not wanting to overwhelm her with my weight, not yet, but she pulled at me until I came down atop her, my pelvis in the cradle of her thighs. The underside of my cock against her soaked pussy. Chest to chest.

“I want your weight on me.” She arched her back to press us more tightly together, her fingers digging in my hair, tightening with her pleasure, and I gave her what she desired.

My body swallowed hers.

For endless minutes, I kissed her. Her mouth, with long, lingering licks, lips clinging. Her cheek and the slope of her neck. I sucked at the hollow of her throat.

And as I worshiped my female, she arched her hips, rubbing us together, her whimpers and sighs meeting my grunts and groans.

She kept her arms around me, only letting them wander over my shoulders and down my back before grasping my nape and pulling my mouth to hers once again.

Finally, I stroked down her side, over her hip, and between our bodies.

I stared down at her face, watching as her eyebrows furrowed, as her breathing increased, while I played with her pussy. Teasing touches, slippery with her lust, between her folds, swirling over her entrance, then rubbing with intention at her hard little clitoris.

She writhed and gave me her sweet moans, and when she came for me, pulses of pleasure rising from her core in waves, I gripped my cock and nudged it against her entrance.

It sucked at me with the lingering beats of her orgasm, and I dropped my forehead to Cassandra's. She tightened her arms around me. "Now," she pleaded.

Who was I to disobey?

I fed her my cock, squeezing the head inside, the barbs flat against it, and she made a shocked noise. I licked her bottom lip as I gave her more.

When she tensed, I caught her eyes and asked, "Good?"

She nodded frantically as her fingers flexed, the tightening on my scalp a delicious burn as her pussy relaxed, and I gave her *everything*.

We lay entwined, two beings caught in a moment of pure ecstasy, of communion. My hips spread her wide, and she

accommodated me so beautifully.

And her soul... her soul was in her eyes.

“You are the most magnificent creature I have ever seen,” I rasped.

She slid a hand between my shoulder blades, the other clinging to my hair. “That can’t be true,” she said hoarsely.

“It is.” My tone brooked no argument, and a tear slipped from her eye. I cupped her chin, licked the salty liquid, and hummed. “You are *everything*.”

And I moved.

Pulled back, thrust forward.

Circled my hips to keep pressure on her little bud as I moved my hand to her throat, feeling it bob beneath my palm.

She tensed, and I halted my movements. “Are you well, Cassandra?” I rasped, sliding my hand beneath her head to thread my fingers in her hair.

She met my eyes for a long moment before her body slowly relaxed. “Yes,” she whispered. “Don’t stop.”

Sensation skittered over every inch of me, as I grunted with the effort it took to keep my movements slow.

Slowly, she began rocking her hips until we made a rhythm all our own. “The barbs...” she slurred. “Feel so good.”

I gripped her hip with my free hand and guided her, and she chanted my name.

And when I neared the pinnacle, I groaned hers. “What a perfect female you are.”

My hips were flying now, pounding against her relentlessly, the wet smack of our flesh joining loud in the room, overshadowing our noises of pleasure.

Her eyes fluttered shut, and I barked, “Open.” She lifted her hooded lids slowly. I needed to see her in those eyes.

I had nothing to fear, for my female was right there with me.

A guttural sound of pleasure tore from my throat as my crisis culminated, just as hers did.

The moment I felt her pussy spasm around me, I planted myself deep inside, the barbs flaring and injecting her with the mating venom as I flooded her with seed.

Her chest arched dramatically as she screamed her pleasure for all to hear.

I roared her name as the barbs finally locked and the last of my cum spurted against the mouth of her womb.

With the venom inside her, her orgasm did not abate, and her pussy clenched me relentlessly, her screams dying away as she lost her voice after her third release... and still, more gripped her.

She trembled, her chest heaved, her hips rolled as another orgasm took hold.

And then I felt the cut of her claws in my shoulders and her fangs in my throat.

I bellowed, my hips kicking with the pleasure and pain of my mate's claim.

Female shifters did not mark their mates with a bite... but I knew, as the bond snapped into place, as I felt her ecstasy and happiness flood my chest, that this was her mating intention.

Sorrow and triumph coalesced into a potent ache that bloomed and ballooned until it stretched my skin.

Sweat coated the both of us until it made our skin slippery, the erotic feel of our mingling perspiration readying my cock again.

When I pulled out, aftershocks made her twitch, her legs shuddering, chest rising and falling with her frantic breaths.

I cuddled her to my side, slipping a leg between hers, and stroked her until her body calmed.

"I never knew it could be like this," she said, her voice raw.

I pressed my lips against her crown and muttered, "Nor I."

She was mine for eternity...

And still, I would betray her.

With her breathing even, I expected Cassandra to succumb to slumber, but she surprised me by speaking. "My scars... they came from the males my father... *gifted* me to."

Fury heated my blood, and my arms flexed around her. "You do not need to speak of this."

"I do," she said firmly, even as she ran a comforting hand down my chest, tucking her face in the curve of my shoulder.

“They would cut me everywhere. They loved the sight of my blood. They wanted me to react. But I learned how to drift away, to separate my mind from my body so I didn’t have to be present while they took what they wanted. I didn’t want to give them the satisfaction of breaking me... so I broke myself. Tore myself apart.”

“You did nothing wrong,” I said with vehemence.

She hummed and kissed my neck, and I leaned into the brief touch. “I know. But you have to understand... when I came back to myself, I was *always* covered in blood. It was everywhere. I felt the pain in my body, knew what happened, but I didn’t have to witness it. Just the consequences of it.” Her nails dug into my shoulder as her hand clenched, and I wished I could take all her pain.

But that was not a gift anyone possessed, not even immortals of vast power.

“I’d lay there and draw symbols in the blood soaking the floor around me. It kept me from completely losing it.” She inhaled sharply and released the breath, tickling my skin, and I nuzzled my chin against the top of her head. “They still come to me, patterns and swirls, simple things. My coven sisters don’t know about my ridiculous doodles. I kept them to myself, comforting myself as I scratched at my notebook whenever the need arose. I never felt anything as soothing until... until you wrapped your wings around me.”

Pride and satisfaction surged within me, swelling my chest, and Cassandra released a soft laugh.

That she spoke freely of something she guarded covetously thrilled me more than any victory in battle.

Her notebook intrigued me. My demon sources had translated a few of Cassandra's scribbles, claiming some were of demonic origin, but how she would know such things, I did not know. The rest were incomprehensible, so I'd set it aside, assuming she stumbled upon such things by happenstance; too much else on my mind to continue assessing them.

Now, I wished I had taken more time to study them.

"Anyway," she murmured. "I had nightmares of blood for years. *My* blood. Sometimes waking nightmares, too. But ever since I came here, at least after the first few days... they're gone. And I know it's because of you." She pulled back to look at my face, and I devoured her features with my eyes. A little smile tipped the corners of her mouth. "I should've known you'd be my mate from that alone."

She lay her head on my chest, let out a sigh, and spoke no more.

My tender emotions competed with guilt, and I worried she felt them in the bond when she stroked a palm over my chest where my heart beat and the bond thrummed. "It's okay, Raz. I wanted everything with you. You did nothing wrong."

And a shaft of pain nearly gutted me, but I swallowed down the lump in my throat and held her tighter.

When she fell into a deep sleep, I lay in her arms, savoring the last moment of peace between us.

Though I knew I did not deserve it.

CHAPTER 27

CASSANDRA

I woke from a dreamless sleep with a smile on my face. Snuggling deeper into the covers, I let out a satisfied sigh. I was in my bed alone, but I didn't question it. I could still feel the heat of Raziel's body on the mattress beside me as I ran a lazy hand over the indentation from his weight.

He stayed with me, and that's what mattered.

And I felt... whole.

It's not that I thought I was all healed up.

Trauma didn't work like that.

I doubted I ever would be, at least not completely.

But I found safety in my mate, the male created solely for me.

The Goddess chose well, and all we could do was honor the gifts she gave us.

In my sleepy haze, it took me far too long to feel the bond.

After we mated, I had sensed Raziel's regret underlying his possessiveness and pleasure.

I assumed he worried I'd done something I wasn't ready for.

But now, the bond swelled with remorse and grief, like icy knives scraping, cutting, burning. I clutched at my chest and opened my eyes. The room was dim, as usual, and I didn't see Raziel right away.

I twisted around so I could lay on my side, and that's when I found him.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed on my right with his hunched back to me, the muscles in one arm flexing and relaxing rhythmically.

As if he sensed me, his head shot up, and he slowly looked over his shoulder. I moved closer to him, reaching out a hand to stroke his back, when something in his hand glimmered in the dim light. He twirled it between his fingers before squeezing it tight, hiding it from view.

He released a whistling breath before rising and walking to the opening in the wall.

"What's going on?" I asked, unease souring my stomach as his grief magnified, making my entire chest ache with the pressure of it.

The muscles in his shoulders bunched, and he rolled his head on his neck before spinning around to face me. His nostrils flared, and he held up the thing in his hand.

A vial.

“What—“

“Inferna is collapsing.” His raw tone lanced through my heart. I propped myself up on my elbow and scooted to the edge of the mattress, but he raised a hand to stop me.

“I—“

“I have been in the Earth realm for many centuries, but I am the Prince of Deception. My kind... needs me.” He released a harsh sound, somewhere between a scoff and a laugh. “I believe you understand the sacrifices we must make for those under our protection.”

An icy realization chilled me to the bone. “You’re going to open the rift.”

Any other time, I would pride myself on the strength of my words.

But the calm delivery hid the heartbreak, the shattering of my hope.

He didn’t respond, just tilted his head to the side.

“You promised...”

Now, the sound he made was anguished. “I am the Prince of Deception, Cassandra. I did not promise to forgo my task. I promised I would not betray you. I promised to protect you.”

I shot to my feet and stumbled toward him, but I couldn’t bring myself to cover the entire distance between us. My skin felt flimsy, like I would disintegrate in a breeze, like I would disappear if I got too close to him. “This *is* betraying me.”

He shook his head morosely. “I will protect you. That I promised you, and that I will always do. I am sorry I took your blood without your knowledge. I will... regret my treatment of you forevermore. But your mated blood was the last piece of the spell. A shifter-witch with a demon mate.” His throat bobbed. “You deserve so much more.”

Deserve. Deserve. Deserve.

Our conversation before we mated pounded against my skull, and I gripped my hair and tugged until my scalp burned.

This was what he meant.

And I was too stupid, too fucking naive, to listen.

“Y-you took my blood. You took my *blood* without my consent,” I whispered, cursing myself internally for exposing how badly he hurt me, how irrevocably he shattered me, in every syllable.

His jaw clenched, and his eyes shimmered with... tears.

One spilled over. “I know you cannot forgive me. I-I cannot forgive myself.” He muttered something under his breath, and the hole in the wall, my symbol of freedom, disappeared.

My jaw dropped, and I held up both hands, palms facing him in entreaty.

“No—“

He didn't hear me.

He was already wrapped in shadows, and in the next second, he was gone.



Minutes, hours, days.

Time passed with no way for me to track it.

My hands were bruised and bloody from pounding on the wall, to no avail.

I lay on the floor, much like I had on my first day here, full of anger and sorrow and regret.

I was so *fucking* stupid.

My cheeks were tight from the dried tear tracks, but no more leaked from my eyes, not after the deluge I'd already cried.

The worst part... after my pity party, I'd decided to do something about my situation.

Fuck being useless.

I'd reached for the Earth's aura, ready to use it, to create vines that could tear down walls. If that didn't work, I was determined to make the house shake until it collapsed.

By will alone, I'd make myself capable of destroying its very foundation.

But I couldn't feel it. My power... it was gone.

Whatever Raziel did to shut the door, he'd shut off my access to it.

And that made me *rage*.

Since my beast was still present, I tore apart the bed.

Unfortunately, my claws didn't do much damage to the walls.

My throat ached from shouting—and I was ashamed to admit... begging, pressing my lips against the wall where the door once was and screaming my pleas.

It was no use.

He wasn't coming back.

He'd made his choice.

And the silly, stupid part of me that adored him, that held onto his tenderness and care, that would *always* care for him no matter what, assumed he left me here to protect me from whatever came through the rift.

I saw his regret, his hurt, on full display. He didn't want to do this. He didn't want to betray me. He didn't want to *use* me.

But he did.

What would your coven do in his place?

I laughed, a sad, pitiful sound.

Anything. We'd do anything.

No matter the cost.

That didn't absolve Raziel.

I could understand him and not absolve him.

Swirling my fingers on the floor, I let myself grieve for a bit longer.

Then I stood up, wiped the crust from my eyes, dusted myself off, and prepared myself for what was to come.

Because he wasn't going to leave me in here forever. Whatever he did, he wasn't the type to keep me captive, not after everything he shared.

And even though I was devastated, I knew much of what transpired between us was *real*.

Eventually, he'd let me out.

And I couldn't be a blubbering mess when he did.

I would run.

I would find my coven... somehow.

And I would fight beside them as the demons descended on our realm.

Even if it meant Raziel would be my enemy. He'd made his choice, and I made mine.

When he said we had a responsibility to our kinds, he was right. I wasn't the strongest or bravest witch, but I *was* a witch. And, like my sisters, I'd been fighting for my life since the day I was born. I'd been fighting for the minor covens in our territory since I became immortal.

And I would fight for the soul of witchkind, to rid it of the Elders' corruption, until I couldn't anymore.

Other enemies cropped up while my sisters and I fought.

We'd handled them all.

The demons would be no different.

Determination strengthened my spine and obscured the pain of Raziel's betrayal. It wouldn't go away. Oh, no.

I knew I'd mourn for what could've been until my soul left my body and returned to the Goddess.

But, for now, I had bigger things to deal with.

Because the moment I made my choice... the Earth rocked, and I stumbled into the shattered remnants of the bed.

A sliver of the bedframe sliced my leg, but I barely felt the warm blood sliding down my ankle because the ground *rippled*.

The foundation cracked, the house groaned, and I rushed to a corner, got on my knees, and covered my head with my arms.

By the time the violent rolling stopped, my stomach heaved from the motion, but the ceiling hadn't collapsed.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but it quickly turned to dread when Raziel's shadows whipped in the center of the room. Slowly, the outline of his frame came into view. His strong legs, the plane of his stomach, the layered muscles of his chest and shoulders, his throat, until his incredibly beautiful face appeared.

Longing and pain scratched along my rib cage. I bit my lip until I tasted blood, pushing them *deep*, stoking my anger instead.

He stared at me in that way that had become so familiar, so loved, like I was all he saw, all he ever wanted to see... and

now, I knew it was a lie, so instead of the flutters of pleasure, it fed my righteous fury.

His eyes softened, agony and tenderness crossing his features, and he reached for me.

When I flattened myself against the wall, he stopped short, a gruff, hurt sound emitting from his chest.

Slowly, he stiffened, his eyes going dull, the muscles in his face slack.

“It is time to greet the queen.”

CHAPTER 28

CASSANDRA

Numbness descended, my mind barely attached to my body, an unwelcome experience, something I hadn't dealt with in so long. Something I never wanted to happen again.

Raziel had my elbow in his firm grasp as he dragged me into shadows, and when we reappeared in the garden I had come to love, he noticed my distance immediately.

He moaned in distress. "Cassandra... do not do this. *Stay with me.*"

To my dismay, I came back into full awareness at his demand.

Impotent tears pricked my eyes, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing them. I thinned my lips and tilted my face so my hair covered me in darkness.

But, of course, he wouldn't let me hide.

He gripped my chin and tugged so our gazes clashed. "Everything I feel about you is true. *Everything.*"

Something in me snapped, the numbness disappearing as hot rage burned it away. “If that was true, you wouldn’t have done this. At the very least, you wouldn’t have sprung it on me, knowing what the demons will do to *my realm*,” I hissed, the venom in my tone making his eyebrows hike to his hairline and his head jerk back. I laughed bitterly. “Sweet, biddable Cass. Vulnerable, *useless* Cass. You thought you could do this, and I would, what? *Accept it?*”

He pulled my arm hard until I stumbled into his chest, then he wrapped me in an unwanted hug, one hand gripping my head to press it to his chest over his heart. It thudded against my ear, and my disgraceful heart started to beat in time with it.

“*Listen to me*,” he snapped, even as his other hand dragged softly down my spine. “My realm is *dying*. My kind would die with it if I did not do this. You may not like demons—your experience with my kind has been a poor one, I concede this—but we do not all deserve to *die*. When the immortals on Earth lost their realms, they came *here*. You would deny us the same?”

“This isn’t the way!” As stupid as I felt yelling into his pec, I had to get this out, to make him understand. Why I still cared about his *understanding*, I let slide. “First of all, you could’ve *talked* to me about it. Explained. Let me prepare my coven for this potential situation. *Earth-bound immortals* needed time to prepare for this!” His grip tightened on my hair, and I hunched my shoulders, desperation choking me. “Some of your kind *eat* humans. Some of your kind *can possess other immortals*.”

He rumbled low in the back of his throat. “My kind will not join this realm to wreak havoc and destruction. I am their *prince*, and I will not allow it. We will learn to coexist.”

“Why didn’t you even try to explain?” I wailed.

“You did not ask.” He grimaced with distaste, but it was too late. He said those words, laid that blame at my feet.

I sucked in a breath and went limp in his arms.

Because he was right.

I didn’t ask.

That didn’t mean he should’ve hidden all this from me, worked behind my back to do something he knew threatened my kind, deceived me so he could get my blood for his *spell*.

But I didn’t ask.

I was living in a dream, and I wanted to stay there.

And now... now it was too late to change a thing.

That didn’t let him off the hook for his deception. I wasn’t claiming that fucking burden. And by the pained expression on his face, the slash of regret, he knew his words were *poison*.

“After everything I’ve shared with you... after opening up to you in ways I hadn’t since I was a witchling, since before my mother died...” I broke off, my throat closing up with agony.

“I should not have said...” He shook his head, regret twisting his face, so unlike the confident male I thought I

knew. Arrows of pain cut into me, and shamefully, some were for *him*.

But far more were for me, for the loss of a hope I stupidly let fill my soul, only for it to turn to ash in a moment's time.

"I know I have deceived you. I cannot justify hurting you in this way. But you understand duty." He let out a ragged sound, an awful lot like grief, matching the painful squeezing around my heart, before dropping his eyes. "Do not trouble yourself so, sweet witch," he murmured, so fucking gentle I almost let my tears break free. "You could not have stopped this, no matter what you did or did not know."

Before I could argue, or sob, or rage, a silky voice broke through the quiet evening.

"Brother."

Raziel stiffened, the fingers in my hair twisting so hard my scalp burned, and I gasped.

His sister. The sister who hurt him. The sister his mother let hurt him.

I shouldn't care about his pain, but I couldn't stop myself from doing just that.

Whatever Raziel and I would be after this, we shared a bond that couldn't be broken. And we were creatures created, in part, by our pasts. The decisions he'd made were driven by the demands of a family that mistreated him. *That*, I could understand.

“Lust,” he rasped, releasing me abruptly. But before I could get my bearings or a good look at the female, he shoved me behind him, keeping his fingers laced with mine.

Then he did something that turned my world on its axis.

He muttered softly under his breath, squeezed my hand, and released me.

I stared at his broad back, stupefied...

Until I felt the rush of the Earth’s aura beneath my feet.

He undid the lock on my witch powers.

To protect me?

I didn’t have time to contemplate it.

“Imagine my surprise that my youngest sibling, so prone to ignoring the orders of his *queen*, did as was required of him,” the female said.

I tried to look over Raziel’s stiff shoulders, but he moved to block me again. “Lust. Where is the queen? Kaaen?”

A malevolent giggle. “They will arrive shortly. Now, why not show me your little morsel? I have never fucked a witch before. Is she *sweet*?”

A menacing rattle sounded from Raziel, raising goosebumps all over my body.

That noise promised death.

Painful death.

“She is *mine*,” he growled. Lust only laughed, a tinkling, beautiful sound, but it settled a rock of dread in my stomach.

“Step aside, sister,” a deep voice boomed.

Raziel visibly relaxed. To my surprise, he pulled me into the crook of his arm—still protective, but the threat of violence diminished.

And I finally got a look at his sister.

She was tall, much taller than me. Slim but with large breasts. Pale skin, dark hair.

I couldn’t make out her eyes, not in the dark, but I felt them on me, and I shuddered.

A male as tall and broad as Raziel approached, only stopping when he was half a dozen feet away from us when Raziel raised his hand. The male had my mate’s dark skin, full lips, and heavy-lidded eyes. They could’ve been twins but for his yellow eyes and close-cropped hair.

This male’s energy... well, it was chaotic.

His demonic designation suited him.

“Do not worry, Brother,” he drawled. “I have no interest in your female.” He shot a smirk over his shoulder, and Lust huffed.

I was so overwhelmed, I forgot about being angry with Raziel.

It would return, I knew that much.

That is, if I survived this.

But considering I was about to face the Queen of Inferna, and was now in the presence of all three of her young, I wasn't about to pick a fight with the only being here who cared about me.

I hoped fervently that my coven could locate me now that the pocket was gone and Earth and Inferna were one.

When dozens of demons appeared behind Chaos and Lust, forming a semi-circle at their backs, I chided myself for my selfishness even as terror stalled my heart and made me tremble, a slow roll like a gathering wave.

If my sisters came, they'd be in danger.

It shouldn't have been possible, but my terror went up another notch until I choked on a gasp.

A female with the most potent, malevolent presence I'd ever felt stalked forward, the semi-circle of demons parting to make way for her.

"Mother," Raziel said as he lowered his head in supplication.

My eyes widened, and I froze. No more shivers. No more heartbeats. No more breaths.

Frozen solid.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Chaos bow and Lust step farther to the right side of the line of demons.

And the queen walked down the center, stopping only feet from Raziel.

She didn't look at me, and that was somehow more menacing than if she'd stared me down.

I was so far beneath her; I wasn't even worthy of a glance.

What would a female like this do to someone she viewed as utterly worthless?

What has Raziel done? She doesn't belong in this realm.

Goddess, did he know what evil lived in his mother?

Of course he does. His youth was spent drowning in that evil. It's astonishing his loyalty remained intact after all those years.

Even my father didn't smother the air with taint like this female.

"My son," the queen said, her voice husky and commanding. "You have done well."

Raziel's arm tightened around my shoulder, a small movement that finally drew the queen's attention to me. She arched an impetuous brow as she scanned me from head to toe, and when she raised her face, her expression conveyed how unimpressed she was.

"This is a great victory for demonkind," she said, her icy gaze back on Raziel. The bond screamed with his discomfort and disgust. *Why listen to her if these were the feelings she inspired?*

Because he loves his kind, even if he hates her.

Empathy welled inside me, and Raziel squeezed me again when he felt it in the bond.

The queen dashed my soft feelings with a flick of her hand. “Get rid of the witch so we may discuss our plans.”

A chill dropped over the garden, and Raziel tilted his head; the movement so unnatural, I shuddered.

“What do you mean?” He enunciated each syllable, and my heart pounded against my ribs as the queen drew herself up taller.

She smiled coldly. “Your *queen* commands you kill the witch so that we may begin our work on Earth.”

While Raziel brimmed with rage, so much of it that it lit our bond aflame.

It galvanized me... and I began pulling earth magic around me.

A month ago, I would’ve cowered beneath a shield.

But now... if this demoness wanted me dead... I’d make her work for it.

Lust cackled in the background. “Did you think you would keep your witch slut, Brother?” She shook her head and pouted. “Poor Raziel, so blind to what is right.” A growl rattled in his chest, and his sister cocked her hips even as a flash of fear crossed her face.

She was afraid of her brother. He said he’d long been stronger than her and relished showing her that fact, and this

proved it.

But she felt brave with her mother issuing commands.

And I... I felt calm.

Because Raziel gave me back my magic just in case this very situation arose.

He did what his queen demanded, opening the rift, for the rest of demonkind... but he wasn't ignorant of his family's depravity.

And *that* increased my faith in him, even if I disagreed with his choices.

Lust's throat bobbed before she dropped a vicious mask over her features. "Earth immortals are prey, no better than beasts. And humans are food and slaves. What did you think would happen to your *witch*?"

"Enough," the queen hissed.

But it was too late.

Raziel filled the bond with disbelief, grief, rage, regret, and finally, resolve.

While Lust frowned at her mother's reprimand, and Chaos rocked back on his heels with a grin, amused by the devolving situation, Raziel pushed me behind him again, cracked his neck, and shook out his arms.

"No," he whispered.

"What did you say?" The queen sounded... stunned.

Raziel rolled his shoulders before letting his glamor drop, his magnificent horns and wings on full display, the soft feathers tickling my skin as his claws descended.

At once, the rest of the demons did the same... except for Chaos. He guffawed instead, his body bent in half, hands slapping at his knees.

The queen's skin turned a mottled purple as her glamor disappeared. She had three horns scooping over her head.

Lust's true skin was a lighter version of her mother's, but she only had one thick horn that curved over her head before straightening to a point that curved to the right.

Raziel's were *far* more impressive, and that wayward thought replaced all fear and doubt with unbridled bloodlust.

I bared my teeth, preparing to fight.

"You would betray your kind for this... this vermin?" Lust asked in disbelief.

Raziel started to laugh, low at first, then louder and louder, until his mirth boomed, overshadowing Chaos'.

The demons in the semi-circle shifted around in confusion, and his mother's chest heaved as she glared.

Lust trembled before locking down her terror.

And I grinned wider.

Because the bond told me all I needed to know.

Raziel was about to *fuck them up*.

“Yes,” he rumbled without any hint of doubt. “And...” He paused, scanning the group of demons, before zeroing in on his mother once again. “I challenge you.”

CHAPTER 29

RAZIEL

I prided myself on being an intelligent, meticulous male.
But apparently, even I made foolish decisions.

However, I was also a male who learned from his mistakes.

And I would bow at Cassandra's feet... after I killed my mother.

Rage was a living thing within me, pressing against my ribs, threatening to split my skin.

But I would not—could not—let it dictate my actions.

It was far too easy to err when blood was hot with lust or anger.

More demons poured out of the night and circled around us.

We were surrounded, but I felt no fear.

My mother's guard was no match for me.

And despite our centuries apart, I knew my brother was far more loyal to me than the females in our *family*.

I also knew my sister was more bluster than strength of purpose. If my mother fell, she would flee.

Of course, she would return, using underhanded tactics to try to claim the crown, to rule demonkind.

But that was a concern for another day.

I needed more time to get control of my rage.

It would be easy enough to keep my mother talking.

She greatly enjoyed the sound of her own voice.

“This was not the plan,” I said, my senses on alert and locked on my mate’s movements.

She scoffed. I kept a close eye on her, ensuring she didn’t make a move to close in on me, and thus, Cassandra.

“You never knew the plan,” the queen spat. “You have had your uses. My blood in this realm. But your time here has tainted you.” Her expression softened, but I knew it was a lie. She wanted to present a sympathetic air. I was no longer a youngling who believed she possessed an ounce of such feeling. “Perhaps, over time, I will begin to trust you again, my son. Killing the witch is a step toward that. Challenging me? It only proves that you have this sickness of the weak immortals who have lived on Earth, injecting themselves with human vulnerability.”

I nodded slowly, and her eyes glinted. Her arrogance would be the death of her.

“You may be right, Mother.” I took a step forward, closing the distance between us. “But I challenge you, nonetheless.”

Finally, a true emotion crossed her face.

Revulsion.

“I will not lower myself to a duel with you. You are weak. Unworthy.”

As predicted, her guard shifted uncomfortably. Demons may have lost many of their customs as Inferna degraded, the seas drying and the land losing its ability to support life, our kind scratching out existence barely worthy of living, slaughtering each other to find catharsis as conditions worsened, but a challenge remained sacrosanct. Only a few decades ago, Lust had commented on a demoness brave enough to issue a challenge to our mother during one of our meetings through the spelled table.

The queen had strung the female’s organs in one of the few remaining trees outside the palace for all to see.

Even Lust appeared stunned. Chaos, though, stepped forward, and I risked a glance at him. He grinned maliciously.

“Mother, as our supreme ruler, I know you understand the rules. If you do not accept his challenge, you forfeit the crown.”

She hissed at my brother, but he only shrugged.

“And if I die? The three of you will squabble over it?”

Chaos tilted his head. “Perhaps we will. That is irrelevant to the challenge before you.”

Quick as a flash, she had Chaos’ throat in her grip. Even as he wheezed for breath, he smiled maniacally at her.

One of the braver demons in her guard stepped forward. A tall, slim male with bright orange skin and violet eyes.

Brave and foolish.

“My queen, forgive me, but the prince is correct.”

My mother twisted her head around and glared, causing the male to stumble backward and mumble more apologies. If she survived the challenge, that guard would die brutally for contradicting her.

Her nostrils flared, but she relinquished Chaos. He choked for air but still managed to laugh uproariously between gasps.

“Fine,” Mother said. A sick smile cut across her face. “Fitting that I would spill the blood of my worthless son before subjugating the immortals of earth.” Her gaze bored into me, and I crossed my arms while moving a step to the right as I heard Cassandra try to shuffle around so she could look past me. I did not want my mother’s eyes upon her.

When I didn’t respond to her jab, the queen’s eyes narrowed, and she growled. “You may as well be one of these vermin.”

Under my breath, I whispered, “Shield yourself.”

I thanked my female's Goddess that she listened despite her antipathy toward me. I felt her magic rise, a tingle at the back of my neck as her shield snapped into place.

And then my mother was upon me, claws raking down my chest. I spun away from her and pulled the shadows to me.

When I reappeared behind her, I sliced my claws into her back.

But my mother was faster.

My attack barely grazed her, though it heartened me to see her blood dripping onto the grass.

She could not call shadows, but she moved like the wind, and every time I pulled the shadows to me, she was one step ahead.

We raced around each other, leaving gouges and scratches.

She dug her claws deep into my abdomen, blood gushing out in red rivulets, but I barely felt the pain.

There was a distinct difference between us, and it kept me fighting even though I knew my mother was older, stronger, faster.

I fought for something far greater than she was.

She was fighting for a crown of rot. To maintain her control over her failed rule.

I fought for the most precious female that had ever lived.

I fought as an apology to her for my betrayal.

My mother sped behind me, and before I could gather shadow, she clawed through the meat of my calf.

With a bellow, I fell to my wounded knee.

Everything slowed down.

Flashes of Cassandra scribbling in her notebook, a soft smile on her face.

The sight of her naked and spread upon a bed, ready for me to paint pleasure on her flesh.

Her tender care of the plants in this very garden.

The curve of her cheek as she slumbered.

But before my mother could take the killing blow, I rolled onto my back, dislodging her claws, and slipped into shadow.

Appearing behind her, I shoved my claws through her spine.

She shrieked in outrage, and I cursed, knowing I missed her heart. Before I could hit her again, her claws flashed in an arc, catching my throat.

The cut was shallow, but Cassandra did not know that.

“No!” my female screamed. Horror and desperation ricocheted in our bond.

Long after her yell died away, the Earth shook with her agony.

I awaited my mother’s next attack, closing my eyes, regret thickening my blood, knowing I had failed my mate.

But it did not come, and the ground still shook.

I opened my eyes and realized it wasn't my mate's anguish that rocked me.

It was her power.

And, as I had always believed she would be... she was *glorious*.

CHAPTER 30

CASSANDRA

The Earth trembled at my command.

I only needed to embrace my rage to do it.

Power whirled around me, seductive, cold, violent.

And I released it all against my enemies.

I watched as the queen and Raziel danced around each other, so fast they blurred, their movements graceful, sinuous, deadly.

He cut her a thousand times, and she matched each one, marking his flesh.

And my fear, the fear that froze me, melted into fury.

It didn't matter what happened between us. He couldn't die.
He couldn't.

I didn't even try to call vines, which had become easy to me.

In fact, I'd sat there beneath my shield watching the spectacle of violence, feeling more impotent than I ever had,

when the queen sliced Raziel's throat.

And it just... exploded inside me.

Millions of starbursts blinding me. I couldn't hear above the rush of blood in my veins. Couldn't feel anything but hot, vicious *power*.

And the Earth rose at my demand, shaking until the demons collapsed, unable to keep their feet under them.

The queen, who'd stood behind Raziel only a moment before, ready to render the killing blow, went flying sideways, and I... *laughed*.

Peals of laughter ripped from my throat until it felt raw, and still I laughed.

And still, the Earth shook for me.

My mate took advantage of the distraction, snapping his mother's neck as she lay prone, unable to stand as the ground rolled.

He plunged a fist through her chest cavity and tore her heart out, dropping the chunks on her face, covering her now lifeless eyes. Even in death, her expression was one of disbelief.

The Earth continued to tremble. It didn't stop until Raziel's eyes found me, wide and awed and dark with lust.

That made me laugh harder.

This isn't the time.

And even though his throat and stomach bled, he grinned at me.

I didn't realize my shield was down. The power was too consuming for such details.

But I figured it out when a body blurred from the right and slammed into me, shoving me onto my back.

The Earth stilled as the air was knocked from my lungs.

Lust.

Raziel roared, but he didn't need to worry.

I positively *brimmed* with power, and it swiftly rose at my command.

Thick, winding vines with thorns as big as my palm shot into the sky behind the female pinning me to the ground.

Right before she plunged her claws into my throat, one wrapped around her arm and pulled it backward so hard and fast, I barely heard the bone snap.

But Lust's shrill scream made up for it.

The other vine caught her free arm and, as one, the vines hoisted her into the air.

Pinioned against a background of night sky.

And I laughed some more, the power clogging my throat, so it came out rough and ragged.

Thinner vines shot out of the Earth, wrapping around Lust as she screeched and bucked, to no avail.

I wasn't satisfied until she resembled a bug caught in a web.

The hysteria of harnessing so much power eased by increments, my racing heart slowly returning to a normal pace, my chest no longer heaving with frantic pants.

But I wasn't done.

I had one more vine for her.

In the back of my mind, as my logic started to returned, I wondered why the demons encircling us hadn't stopped me.

But with my prey in front of me, I ignored that nagging voice and focused on wrapping the final vine around her throat and pulling it taut.

Tighter.

Tighter.

I wanted to pop her head off like a cork.

Baring my teeth, I raised my hands and prepared to do just that.

“Cassandra.”

I cocked my head to the side.

“Sweet witch, stop.”

I shook my head.

“Stop, *now*.”

The demand ignited my rage once again. “You do *not* command me.”

Raziel's chest pressed against my back. Even though I snapped at him, I hesitated to give Lust the killing blow.

Fucking mate bond.

The heat of him behind me was too big of a distraction, and I shivered, leaning into him.

He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me closer so his erection prodded my ass.

He likes this. He likes the violence.

Didn't all immortals?

"A witch embraces her violence," I mumbled to myself.

"Of course she does," Raziel purred. "But Lust must live if the Earth realm is to be protected."

I scoffed. "She has no love for humans or Earth-bound immortals."

He hummed and flattened his palm between my breasts. "I feel your power in the bond, sweet witch, and it is *intoxicating*. But what I speak is true." Then, he drew away from me and shouted, "I am your king!"

I lowered my arms slowly and, just as slowly, spun around to look at the demons, *finally* reacting to the voice in my head that told me there were more threats to contend with.

But it was wrong.

There were no threats.

All the demons were on their knees, bowing so low their foreheads touched the ground.

Except for Chaos.

He had his arms crossed and a jackal's smile painted on his face... one that would rival Fin's, and *he* was a connoisseur of smiles that promised death and destruction.

Then the male lowered his arms and gave Raz a jaunty bow. "All hail the King of Deception. Perhaps he will be a better monarch than the Queen of Tricks."

There was a tense silence, then every demon in the garden began chanting, "*King of Deception.*"

Raziel stepped forward, but he winked at me over his shoulder before bellowing, "My one and only order as king is that you may not harm humans or immortals without *just* cause. Not until the next monarch is selected."

The demons looked at each other in confusion, and Chaos cackled.

Raziel turned to me, but before he took another step, his brows furrowed. Then he yelled, "I abdicate the throne."

A cacophony of voices followed his proclamation, but he paid them no mind.

I was too busy gawking at him to do anything but stand stiffly, and it gave him the opportunity to swoop me into his arms. "Release Lust. With her and Chaos fighting for the crown, it will protect humans and immortals for a longer period of time."

Dumbfounded, I opened and closed my mouth, and Raziel smirked. "Release her," he purred.

And I did.

We didn't stick around to watch Lust extricate herself from the vines, or to see how the other demons responded to Raziel's decree.

He started wrapping me in shadow immediately.

"Where are we going?" I managed to ask.

He searched my face with soft eyes, and remorse twinged in the bond. "I shall take you to your coven. Our bargain is complete."

CHAPTER 31

CASSANDRA

Raziel dropped me off inside my coven's protection spell and vanished.

My body was still jittery from everything that happened that night, but his disappearing act brought new emotions... confusion, disappointment, a hint of relief.

Wherever he was, I felt his determination in the bond.

He'd be back.

Would I be ready to face him?

Surprisingly, no one rushed to greet me. I knew Naiya had cameras overlooking most of the outside of the compound, but she must not be in front of them.

Gingerly, I rose to my feet. My legs shook, but I didn't let the weakness stop me.

The old single-story house I grew up in was ten feet in front of me.

Raziel had left me in the back, so I circled around to the front door.

As always, it was unlocked, and I pushed it open.

When I stepped inside, nostalgia nearly overwhelmed me. I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of home.

When I was a witchling, my mother's coven and all my coven sisters lived in this house. It was small, but it had enough room for each of us, although we had to share with our mothers.

We only had happy memories within these walls. Minor covens had always lived in the compound beneath it, but our mothers insisted we be the first line of defense, that if anyone sought to attack the compound, they'd come through the front door first.

That changed when we were in human school, a rite of passage for all witches. Our kind, along with shifters, interacted with humans more than any other immortals, so we had to learn to blend as much as possible.

When a rival Head Coven tried to kidnap Naiya outside our human high school, or at least ordered one of their minor covens to attempt it, our mothers decided we would take residence in the subterranean compound, and we abandoned our home.

But we were still the first line of defense.

The compound was structured in concentric circles. The outermost one being the only path inside, and it led to the

Head Coven quarters. There, we had meeting rooms, a kitchen, a weapons room, a library, and our bedrooms.

The next circle housed our second coven. The remaining circles were residences for minor covens.

Being in this place gave me purpose.

I was born on this land. I would die for the witches and other immortals who resided here.

As they would for me.

When I reached the hidden door, I pulled it open and descended the stairs into my home.

The entryway was quiet, so I headed to the kitchen.

Of all the rooms in the compound, I would most likely find my sisters there. If not, I'd head down to the pit.

They *really* enjoyed fighting.

But I was lucky.

It appeared Naiya had called one of her customary meetings in the kitchen.

As an earth witch, it was really easy for me to... sneak around. I didn't really have to think about it, the magic from the Earth's aura lightening my footsteps for me. So, as I stood in the doorframe, my sisters took a bit of time to notice me.

In fact, Makhi was the first. Like the other males, he stood sentry behind his mate, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed while the females sat around the table.

Pain cut through my heart as I saw how ragged Colette's face was.

I knew it was because of me.

Then Makhi began to splutter. "Cassandra!"

And every head in the room swiveled in my direction.

And they stared in astonished silence.

I burst into tears.

Even through the flood, I caught the stunned expressions cutting across their faces.

I *never* showed emotion like this.

And once they got over their shock, that visible sign of how changed I was got everyone moving.

Voices competed for dominance, urgent conversation flowing rapid-fire, but I couldn't understand a word.

Not until Naiya shot out of her seat, Fin grabbing her elbow to help her up, and she glared at him. "I'm *fine*. I had the younglings four months ago!"

"Faeling, I will always take care of you," Fin purred.

My heart swelled.

They're the same.

Only you've changed.

Naiya skirted around the table as everyone else yelled at each other. She stopped in front of me. I couldn't stop crying, and her face, her beloved face with her dark blue eyes and the

divot in her chin, her brow creased in concern, made me sob harder.

She was so petite, but when she wrapped her arms around me, I collapsed into them, and she held my weight, running soothing hands down my back. “I’m so glad you’re here.” The catch in her voice was more emotion than she usually showed, and my throat squeezed.

As my tears died down, Naiya pulled back and showed me her fierce expression. “Now tell me everything,” she gritted out.

I ended up sitting next to Eva. Willow was on my other side, Toric the brooding presence behind her. Our fire witch had flames dancing on her skin as she muttered about disemboweling and roasting demons.

On the other side of her were Colette and Makhi. Letty was crying silently, and Makhi’s palms cupped her shoulders as he glared around the room. Naiya and Fin were beside them, and Greer and Aleks completed the circle. Aleks had his arms crossed as he watched me intently. He probably expected me to run. Whenever he was around, I usually did, unable to handle his alpha energy. But I’d had a whole ordeal with a male who exuded far more dominant energy than him, and I wasn’t the same witch anymore. After a moment, he relaxed his stance, and everyone’s eyes darted between us in surprise.

Maybe if he snuck up on me, I’d have that instinctive flight response, but for now, nothing seemed to faze me.

Greer eyed me, her expression curious, as she tried to uncover the puzzle of my disappearance. In that way, she reminded me of Raziel.

And that sent pain slicing through me, so much I winced.

I could practically hear them all waiting on bated breath for me to escape, to hide.

I cleared my tear-clogged throat. “You can stop staring at me like that. I’m... I’m stronger than you think.”

A pregnant pause followed my declaration, but Eva’s lips tipped into a grin, and Greer nodded to herself. Naiya’s face went slack, Letty’s sniffles dried up, and the males darted confused glances at each other.

I licked my lips, completely overwhelmed and unsure of how to proceed.

“Fuck this.” Willow jumped out of her seat and threw herself at me. I nearly tipped my chair with her added weight, and I couldn’t contain my startled laugh. Her embrace was rough, grasping, and it comforted me like nothing else. She wasn’t demonstrative, didn’t really like to touch or be touched... except when it came to Toric.

This was an expression of her love.

“I missed kicking your ass in the pit,” she said with a smirk and an uncharacteristic sniff of emotion. When she plopped in her chair, the rest of my coven sisters followed her lead.

Eva leaned over and wrapped one arm around my shoulders, giving me a sideways hug before gruffly saying, “I’m glad

you're back.”

Greer reached across the table and clasped my hand, giving it a squeeze, her eyes softening.

And Letty rushed out of her chair to wrap me in a tight hug, crying “I love you” into my shoulder.

I held her extra tight.

She had tried so hard to heal me.

Later, I would thank her for it, and tell her she didn't fail me.

No one else could heal me but myself.

Makhi had to guide her back to her seat, and I wiped away the fresh tears that slipped down my cheeks.

Naiya coughed awkwardly. “We'll have plenty of time to catch up, but we need to know what the fuck happened.”

Eva scoffed. “Don't hold back.” She jabbed a finger at me, and I recoiled. “We've been looking for you. All of us. Naiya even got Isis and her coven involved.” I flushed with guilt. The Head Coven of Washington and Oregon territory were brand new allies, having helped us defeat a pack that attacked Aleks', a pack that joined with the Head Coven of Indiana and Montana to plan a surprise attack on our territory. We decimated that Head Coven, too.

Naiya wouldn't have liked asking Isis for help and potentially owing her a favor this early in our alliance.

Eva ignored my forlorn expression and continued. “They’ve scoured their territory. The packs, including Greer’s father, have been hunting for a trail, a *hint* of a trail. Nothing. You didn’t even leave a *note*. I defended your plan to *everyone*, but this *wasn’t* the way. And we even contacted Sarah to help—you know, the vampiress that helped Willow and Toric defeat the Head Coven that wanted to destroy the berserkers? She went straight to the vampire king to try to get his help. You wouldn’t believe the price he tried to get out of her—“

“That’s enough,” Naiya growled.

But Eva’s anger vibrated in the air, and, combined with the immense guilt that nearly cut me in half, I started to cringe away. My sisters called in every reinforcement they could to find me, thinking I was in danger. And I never even asked Raziel to let me contact them, to reassure them. *They would’ve never taken your word that you were fine. They believed you were too fragile to make dangerous choices, no matter the potential benefit.* I squeezed my eyes shut, knowing that was true, but regret pulsed hot and thick in my veins.

I owed them so much more than an apology, but we didn’t have time. I called some of the Earth’s aura to me. Not enough to do magic, but enough to firm my spine.

Then, I swallowed around the lump of emotion in my throat so I could speak clearly. “I know. I knew you would. I’m sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing. Raziel promised to save June, and we didn’t have a better plan to free her. I-I wanted to

help. I was in a pocket between the demon and Earth realms... that's why you couldn't find me."

Naiya smacked her hands on the table. "That's why you talk to us! We could come up with a plan *together*."

Greer waved a hand. "Actually, Cass did talk to us. She made this plan, and we never came up with a better one. You just unilaterally decided to step in and undermine her."

Naiya glared at our air witch. "What did you expect me to do? Let her run off with the demon?"

"The fact of the matter is, your interference didn't stop anything. At the very least, if we had shown Cass some trust, we could've better prepared for this. We fucking agreed to let Willow go off to the *berserkers*, yet didn't trust Cass to deal with one demon? That doesn't make sense, Nai. We're equals in this coven."

My eyes widened at Greer's support. Then again, she was the most rational among us, and what I said was true. We hadn't come up with another viable plan to save June.

And if we were going to save all of witchkind, we *needed* June.

"Wait," Willow drawled. "Hold up. A *pocket*?" She glared at Fin. As if it was his fault pockets existed outside the fae realm.

He held up his hands. "There are pockets everywhere."

Naiya's head swiveled, and it appeared she would rip out her mate's spine if she could. "*What?*"

Fin shrugged, smiling sheepishly. “Apologies, faeling. I do not know all you witches *do not know*. There is *so much*.”

“Stop the foreplay, assholes. We have bigger concerns,” Eva snapped.

“Can’t we just be glad Cass is back?” Colette asked in a thick voice.

Naiya stared her mate down for a moment longer before weariness drooped her shoulders. She sighed. “We still need answers.”

I nodded. “You do. Urgently.” I closed my eyes against the pain of my mate’s betrayal and the regret for all the worry I’d caused the females who loved me. “But... Greer and Eva are right,” I whispered. Naiya jolted, but I continued, needing to make myself clear. “I love you all. You’ve protected me when you didn’t fully understand what you were protecting me from. But either I’m an equal member of this coven, or I’m not. Either you trust me to help, or you don’t.”

I scanned the table, trying to imbue my expression with my determination. Letty sat up straighter, a slow grin lit up Eva’s face, Greer nodded, and Willow grumbled her agreement.

Naiya’s eyes were so wide, it would’ve been comical if we weren’t about to face an influx of new enemies.

And that thought gave me the strength to continue. “Raziel opened the rift. Earth is open to the demon realm now.”

Silence reigned.

Then everyone exploded.

“What the fuck?” *Eva*.

Willow’s flames sparked hotter. “I should’ve killed that douchebag demon,” she hissed.

“H-he killed his mother... to protect me. He killed the demon queen,” I mumbled to myself. “He betrayed her *for me*.”

The room fell still, but not for long.

“Well, that’s the best kind of apology,” Willow said, satisfaction in every word.

Surprisingly, Naiya laughed. “Yes... yes it is.”

“Violence is better than flowers,” *Eva* sang, making Colette choke on a giggle.

“This is true,” I said slowly.

The temporary mirth dissipated as quickly as it came, the implications of the rift opening hitting everyone at once.

Aleks growled steadily, his light skin mottling and lean frame vibrating. “I need to warn my pack.” Greer reached back to squeeze his hand.

Fin cackled. “This will be *delightful*.”

Naiya spun around and faced off with her mate. “We have *younglings*. We have to protect them. And we already have enough fucking enemies.”

As Fin’s eyes split to dual-colored, setting off his ethereal, pale skin, icy green irises giving way to blood red with his high emotion. Makhi stepped forward, his violet eyes shifting

to murky darkness that matched his burnished skin, thick muscles flexing in his chest. “No one will harm the younglings. *No one.*”

“I’m so sorry. I failed us all,” I whispered.

The next voice quieted *everyone*.

“No, you didn’t.”

I whipped my head to the door and rose to my feet in a daze. “J-June?”

Naiya had a dagger in her hand in a blink. Willow’s flames raced up her arms, and the writhing grey of death magic filled Eva’s eyes.

Greer and Aleks started to shift.

Makhi’s muscles swelled, calling to his berserker half.

Toric, meanwhile, split the seams on his clothing, full berserker rage taking over.

I didn’t have time to look at everyone else... because Raziel was all I saw. He took up most of the space in the doorway, his big body still drenched in blood from the fight with his mother, but it didn’t seem like more seeped from his wounds.

I searched his face, and he smiled at me apologetically while hiking his arms up, as if... offering June to me.

Was this his attempt to make everything up to me?

It’s not bad.

I shook my head to clear it, but it was useless.

Seeing June in his arms, in the flesh, after so long, made me lightheaded. I collapsed into my chair.

My coven sisters didn't have the same weakness, and they all jumped to their feet.

June looked... terrible. She was bruised, bloodied, and covered in scars, including one that bisected her eyebrow and cheek before looping along her chin.

The Elders had... tortured the All-Elemental.

They put witchwater on her wounds to make them permanent scars.

Bile churned in my stomach until I tasted it in the back of my mouth.

This was beyond depraved.

June was the rightful leader of witchkind... and the Elders, the females who were supposed to represent and protect our laws and values... *mutilated her*.

I had no illusions about the Elder Council's corruption, but this was *unfathomable*.

"What the..." Willow swayed on her feet. Apparently, my sisters were far more affected than I realized. Toric grunted and grabbed her elbow to steady her.

June cleared her throat and patted Raziel on the chest. His pained eyes had been on me the whole time, but that pulled them away for a brief glance. "You can put me down," she whispered in a weak voice.

Gently, he set her on her feet.

She leaned against the counter to keep herself upright, and Raziel shifted from foot to foot.

Unlike almost all the mate introductions we'd had in this room, he got off easy.

June was too great of a distraction for my coven sisters to start in on him. I hadn't even gotten to telling them I mated Raz.

That he killed his mother would probably incline them to liking him... a bit.

Every male in the room had done something fucked up to their female. Raziel would be harassed and browbeaten... but they'd accept him eventually.

I let fear and doubt cloud that truth. If I accepted Raziel, my sisters would, too. And if they did, so would their mates.

"Don't talk," June mumbled.

She didn't have to say it. We were all too stunned to speak.

I scanned her form, taking in her ratty, dirty blonde hair, the dull sheen over her eyes, cataloging the bruises, the torn clothing. The evident weakness.

And my shock transformed into simmering anger and loathing.

But June cut it off before it could grow into a conflagration. "You didn't fail." Her eyes bored into me. "Everything went according to plan."

That snapped Eva out of her daze. “According to whose plan?” she asked slowly.

June gave her a wan smile. “Mine.”

CHAPTER 32

CASSANDRA

We moved into the boardroom shortly after June dropped her bomb.

As much as we tried to avoid the space that had been our mothers' preferred meeting place, sometimes it was the only room that could accommodate us.

June sat at the head of the table with Naiya across from her. We ended up in the same configuration as the kitchen, but this time, June was between me and Eva, and Raziel was on my left.

I hadn't spoken a word to him, but his gaze was hot on the side of my face.

I swallowed, equal parts relieved he was okay and hurt by all that had occurred.

June slouched in the chair and looked around the black-and-glass table before settling on me. "Try not to be *too* mad at your mate. He played his part perfectly, even if he didn't realize he was."

And the word *mate* set off another bomb.

Before my coven could demand answers, June raised a trembling hand.

How she was conscious, I didn't know, but everyone settled down, her authority clear. She tipped her chin in my direction. "Why don't you explain."

I bit my lip before squaring my shoulders and meeting my sisters' eyes one by one. "Raziel is my mate. He's known the whole time, and that's part of why he made a bargain with me." I grimaced. "And the other part was him needing my *mated* blood to open the rift."

"Motherfucker," Willow snapped.

The entire room lit up as power lit behind just about every witches' eyes except mine.

When June's power cut through the glow, a kaleidoscope of color, we all shifted in our seats. Gradually, the room dimmed, now only lit by a simple wall sconce.

June inhaled deeply before releasing the breath slowly. "There's so much to say... I'll try to keep it short. Basically, the demon queen enlisted the help of the Elders to open the rift—hence Colette's kidnapping, the murder of Aleks' former Omega, the whole lifeblood plot by Makhi's former clan of demon-possessed warlocks."

Raziel slammed a fist on the table. "No. Lust did this. I am certain she worked against my mother, attempting to claim power for herself."

“That’s just what your sister wanted you to believe. Aim the hottest of your ire at her so you couldn’t see the machinations behind the scenes. The queen and Lust are one. She’s your mother’s chosen heir.”

“How could you know such a thing?” Raziel snapped as he ran a hand through his hair in agitation. Sympathy filled me. Tentatively, I placed a hand on his thigh in comfort. He froze, then quickly covered it with his own.

Gratitude warmed the bond.

“Because... ugh, I’ll get to that. Anyway,” June continued with a wave. “That plan didn’t work, but between beatings number fifty-one and fifty-two, our one and only Elder life witch, Nephthys, came down to my quaint little cell and bragged that the Elders still received their payment, courtesy of Raziel.”

My gaze snapped to my mate, and he had the nerve to look sheepish. “What did you give them?”

He cleared his throat. “I was... the demon who assisted them in creating their more robust protection spell. But I did not realize it was payment for the lifebloods. I did my mother’s bidding without question,” he said in a tone full of self-loathing.

I shut my eyes, wanting to disappear, to cry, to—

“Cass, you have to understand... every immortal has loyalties to their own kind. Raziel didn’t even know you when this happened. He only knew *of* you.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Eva growled.

“Of course it does,” June retorted. “What would *you* do for our kind, hmm? For the females under your protection? How far would *you* go? If you’d never met your mate and were given the choice to be loyal to him or your kind?”

I opened my eyes.

June was right.

It didn’t hurt any less, but she was so right.

Naiya tried to change the subject. “Why did you act all glad we killed the demons who went after the lifebloods?”

Raziel shifted in his seat, his energy turning sharp, dangerous. “At the time, I believed they worked against the crown. It is—*was*—my job to pass judgment on those of my kind who did not do as their sovereign commanded. And had I known the truth, well... I am the Prince of *Deception*, female.”

Unbidden, a choked laugh ripped out of me, and Raziel looked inordinately pleased with himself.

What is this world we’re living in?

June tried to get us back on track. “The demon queen isn’t stupid—“

“Was not stupid,” Raz interrupted. “She is dead.” He paused. “Perhaps she was, indeed, stupid.”

Everyone gawked at him, and he grinned.

June waved a hand. “Wasn’t stupid. Raziel’s been here working on a *much* more complicated spell as a backup plan,

one that doesn't necessarily require any deaths, which makes it less efficient. Demon magic does *much* better with sacrifice, from what I understand." She dragged her fingers through her hair, but as it snagged on knots, she huffed in exasperation and gave up.

"Wait, wait, wait," Greer murmured, her eyes darting around as she sorted through her thoughts. Aleks cupped her nape and whispered in her ear, and she mumbled something back before kissing him. She met June's eyes. "Sorry, I'm trying to catch up. You *wanted* the rift open?"

"Yes."

I was beginning to feel overwhelmed, my familiar urge to flee rising, but Raziel's reassurance filled the bond. I still felt jittery, but he'd calmed me enough to settle into my seat.

I hated that I felt gratitude for it.

Greer's jaw worked for a moment. "But... we stopped Makhi's clan."

June narrowed her eyes. "I would *never* do it at the expense of Colette's life. And... I didn't know the rift needed to be open back then, but it doesn't matter. Unlike demons"—she shot a sly smirk in Raziel's direction, and he bowed his head as if she honored him. *Seriously, what world is this?*—"some sacrifices are too great. Your lives most of all. You're my sisters, regardless of our parentage. I..." Her eyes glimmered with unshed tears. "I love you all."

No one breathed for a beat.

“We love you, too,” Letty said with emotion.

The rest of us murmured our agreement.

“I, as well,” Fin interjected.

Naiya smacked him on the arm.

“What? June was a most gracious host when I attended your coven’s challenge, faeling.” Fin purred. “She was with me when I caught my first glimpse of the most intriguing female I have ever known. So tiny and fierce, I yearned to carry you in my pocket with me back to the fae realm.”

Now Naiya looked murderous, but his commentary broke the tension, and we all chuckled at her expense.

Sometimes, that was all we needed to keep it together in grave circumstances.

“How?” Willow asked between giggles. She covered her mouth and coughed before hardening her features. “How do you... know it needs to be open?”

“I can... see things. Not always clearly, and rarely in chronological order. But... I get glimpses, visions you could call them.”

I jerked back in shock.

Visions were a skill only life witches possessed, and they didn’t always develop them.

“Look,” June continued as if she hadn’t upended our knowledge about witch powers in one fell swoop. “My

parentage isn't exactly 'pure,' either. My mom... she was, like, a quarter siren. Her father was half angel, half shifter."

Willow clutched at her chest. "I think I'm having a heart attack."

"Witch," Toric hissed in concern.

"She's being dramatic," Naiya drawled, but she watched June with calculating eyes. "Why did you never tell us this?"

"I was told not to by my mother. Well, not to keep it from you, but to keep it from everyone. Unfortunately, it's too late. The Elders did all kinds of fun experiments on me, including taking my blood. They probably know what I am by now," June said wryly.

One important question hadn't been answered. I licked my lips. "But *why*? Why does this need to happen?"

June closed her eyes, her chest rising with a deep breath. When she opened them, I shuddered.

She was terrified.

"There are far worse enemies than Earth-bound and realm-bound immortals. And if we don't unite... if the realms don't unite... we'll never be able to defend ourselves."

Greer ran a hand down her face. "This is too much," she muttered. "What are we supposed to do with... all of this."

"We all have tasks to complete. For now, I want Cass to get her notebook."

I sucked in a breath.

“What notebook?” Eva asked.

“What do you want with it?” I whispered.

June grinned, but fear lingered in the lines of her face. “We’re going to take some of Raziel’s blood—only fair, since he stole yours.” Raz stiffened in his seat, remorse prickling the bond, but I kept my gaze on June. “Then we’re going to combine it with mine and yours and everyone else’s in this room, which should cover us on pretty much every immortal creature there is.” She leaned forward, excitement sparking in her eyes. “And then we’re going to make the most badass protection spell there is.”

If I was on my feet, I would’ve collapsed. Raziel seemed to sense my weakness, and he cupped the side of my neck. The gesture was so comforting, easing me on contact.

Tears burned my eyes, but I blinked them away.

We had too much to deal with before I had it out with my mate.

“So... the symbols... they’re a spell?” I mumbled.

June nodded eagerly. “A fucking *powerful* one.”

“Did this spell come from the Earth?” Raziel asked.

She shook her head slowly, her brows furrowing as she caught my gaze. “Didn’t you know? They came from the Goddess.”

My heart tripped over itself, and my jaw dropped. “*What?*”

Raziel scooted closer, emanating heat, grounding me.

“She didn’t abandon you,” June said gently. “You needed to be protected, and she gave you the means to do it.”

“Too late,” Greer hissed. “Where was she when Cass was suffering?”

June glanced at my coven sister. “At her side. Always at her side. This isn’t the time to doubt Her. Do that on your own time, Greer.”

“The Goddess let her father—“

“No,” I whispered. Greer bristled, but when she took in my face, her ire faded away, replaced by so much love. When my eyes darted around the table, my coven sisters met me with identical expressions. My gratitude for these females swelled impossibly, threatening to break through my ribcage. “The Goddess didn’t let my father do anything. She gives us our powers and our mates, but she doesn’t get involved in how we live our lives.” I paused and turned to Raziel, finding his gaze intent on me. I couldn’t handle his reverent expression and faced June again. “But... but if what you say is true, she did more for me than she’s supposed to.”

June nodded. “That’s right.”

“Why?”

“Because you had no one. Because you deserved it. You deserved to be protected and loved and cherished. And you still do.”

My throat tightened with emotion.

“June’s right,” Naiya murmured. I whipped my face to her, and she smiled sadly. “You do. I’m glad She was with you.”

June stood on shaky legs, drawing my attention. Her eyes began to glow once more. “And now, you need to accept Her gift. We’ll need it in the days to come.”

CHAPTER 33

RAZIEL

My female and I entered the massive garden, and I now understood why she disdained the one inside my home.

Every plant was carefully and lovingly tended. They were beds of herbs, flowers of all sorts, and the paths between them showed how well treaded this space was.

Cass walked beside me and sighed in contentment as she looked around, taking in every corner teeming with life.

“You spend much time here, I gather?”

She glanced at me, and her hands twitched. My female was still wary, and guilt burned like acid in my stomach. She nodded but did not say a word.

“Hurry,” June yelled. She was several dozen feet ahead of us, but she had stopped by an immense tree. Its branches swayed in the breeze. It almost appeared to... reach for the petite female.

This is the sovereign of my female's kind. This slip of a witch with dark eyes and light hair, with more scars than Cassandra and I combined.

What powers must she possess in that tiny frame?

“What do I have to do?” Cassandra asked softly.

June held out her hand, and my mate grabbed it. “I want you to take the blood and write the spell in the dirt around the tree.”

Cassandra lowered her eyes for a moment before she moved around June, lifted the bowl full of blood, and stepped over the squat stone wall surrounding the tree.

As she went to work, I faced the All-Elemental. “And what do we do?” She lowered herself onto the wall, her shoulders slumping. “Female, you are too weak. Why do you not go inside and rest?”

She huffed. “I need to see this through. And as for your question, you're here to guard Cass while she does this important work.”

Then the impertinent female lay down atop the wall and shut her eyes.

But she was correct. My sweet witch was intent on her task, having spread the notebook out in front of her, her attention entirely on dipping her finger in the blood and writing in the dirt, and she required protection while she was distracted.

Hours later, I had scanned the gardens hundreds of times, and I was ready to demand Cassandra take a break, when

movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention.

“Raziel. I believe you set a record for the demon crowned for the shortest time.”

My tense shoulders eased. “Kaaen.” Regardless of our centuries apart, I would always remember him as my companion, the male who understood our sister’s cruelty, our mother’s disdain. The one who protected me when he could, who I equally shielded.

Trust born in such circumstances remained, regardless of distance and time.

“Miss me, Brother?” he asked as he sauntered over.

Before he reached me, he stopped abruptly, his gaze dropping to June’s slumbering form.

Then his face split into a wide smile. “And who is this?” he drawled.

I crossed my arms and stepped in front of him, blocking the female I had become strangely protective of... strange, considering I was the one who set her on the path of torment.

Cassandra’s coven was not keen on forgiving me for my part in June’s capture, but the All-Elemental witch insisted it was meant to happen, and they reluctantly halted their tirades.

The males accepted me easily enough, which was quite the surprise.

“A demon will be useful,” Makhi said after a long silence. The male ran a hand through the long hair atop his head

before dragging it over the shorn side.

Finrador's eyes split. "It is his fault the demons are on Earth." A pause. "As this will afford me the chance to test my strength, I approve."

Aleks tilted his head, searching down the hallway, presumably for eavesdropping females. "Don't let Naiya hear that." He turned to me and glared. "Unlike Fin, I don't need to prove myself. What the fuck were you thinking, asshole?"

Though I was loath to do so, I allowed the males to see my remorse. "I had to protect my kind. We are not all like my mother."

Toric grunted. "Our females are hybrids."

"Astute observation," Fin purred.

The fae male, clearly anticipating a fight, grinned when Toric's eyes flared. But the males fell silent after the berserker leader's words.

"We must find a way to protect them and our kinds."

"You are far too distracted, Raziel. I could abscond with the delicious female, and you would not know it until far too late," Chaos said through his amusement.

I blinked away the memory, irate that Kaaen was correct.

"Don't worry," June said in a sleepy voice. "Chaos would never hurt me."

My brother jolted. "Of course I would, female," he said, each word slow and deliberate.

I heard June shift, followed by her footsteps. When she reached my side, she craned her neck to meet my brother's eyes. "No... you wouldn't."

I looked over my shoulder to ensure Cassandra was well.

She was much as she had been the last few hours. Focused. Every movement graceful.

She was so utterly beautiful, it near blinded me at times.

I returned my gaze to my brother. His visage was stricken, and in any other circumstance, I would relish his discomfort, tease him for it.

However, I was just as confused.

"I feel I must inform you that every demon you come across would, indeed, harm you."

June did not relent in staring at my brother. "You may be right. But not him. He's one of mine." She gave Kaaen a lopsided grin, completely ignoring the horror on his face, then spun around and stalked back to my mate. "All done?"

Cassandra mumbled in assent, and I rushed to my female's side.

She struggled to rise after being in the same position for so long, and it warmed me that she leaned against my frame, trusting me to support her weight.

It was a small thing, but after everything that transpired between us, it felt enormous.

As I helped her step over the stone wall, I saw June facing Chaos once again.

I had never witnessed fear in my brother.

But this slip of the female inspired it.

“You better leave quickly,” she said. “This spell can keep angels and demons out. If you’re inside the compound without being blooded, you’re going to disintegrate.”

She patted Chaos on the chest, and he recoiled before catching my eyes, his full of desperation.

I chuckled. “You have lived among demons too long. We assumed witches were inferior, but as you can see, you do not stand a chance against them.”

“Run, Prince of Chaos,” June sang, cocking her hip suggestively as she moved farther away from him. “I forgot I had one last surprise, and you really don’t want to be around for this one.”

She raised her arms to the sky and...

Burst into a kaleidoscope of light so blinding, Cassandra and I had to avert our eyes.

And even then, I saw the light behind my lids, as bright as the sun.

It burned and burned. When my female whimpered, I pushed her face into my chest and wrapped her in my wings to protect her eyes. She clung to me, and even with the pain June’s light wrought, contentment settled over me.

Soon, I heard the rest of my mate's coven, along with their males, joining us in the garden.

By their exclamations, June's light hurt them as well.

Then, in a rush, it disappeared, but not before a rolling crash sounded, like boulders falling by the thousands. I retracted my wings but kept my female tucked into my side.

"What did you do?" Cassandra rasped.

June swayed on her feet, but she shot my female a smile over her shoulder and whispered, "The angels are coming. Even if Raziel's siblings can't control the demons, they'll be way too busy to fuck with Earth-bound immortals or humans for the time being."

"What?" Makhi roared, shoving Colette behind him, as if that would be enough to protect her from a plague of angels.

Fear and rage twined together behind my sternum as I searched the skies for the incoming invasion.

"They won't arrive for some time," June slurred. I returned my gaze to her, watching as she swayed. Out of the corner of my eye, Colette attempted to go to her, but her mate refused to release her. When Cassandra did the same, I held her even tighter, so much so, my female gasped.

"When will they arrive?" Fin crossed his arms, the picture of disinterest.

His eyes, however, gleamed with excitement.

"You are *not* fighting an angel," Naiya growled.

To the left, Toric stomped forward. “Angels to fight?”

Willow cackled.

At my side, Cassandra shook, and horror choked me... until I felt her amusement in the bond.

“What is this?”

She giggled, a delightful sound I wanted to hear again and again... in circumstances that were not *dire*, that is.

If the angels attempted to harm my female, I would rend their wings and cut off their—

“It’s just, they’re always like this,” my female said through her mirth, diverting my violent thoughts. “It doesn’t matter what’s happening, what terrible things are coming, what danger we’re in... they’re *always like this*.”

I scanned the grounds, observing the females bickering with their mates—except for Willow and Eva, who looked equally excited at the prospect of war with angelkind.

“Your coven is ludicrous, female.”

And Cassandra threw back her head and laughed uproariously, the sound pulling my lips into a grin.

Her happiness was the most incredible thing I had the pleasure of witnessing.

I vowed to make it appear often.

But the delightful sounds of laughter stopped abruptly, and my female jerked out of my hold before I could stop her.

As I rushed after her, I saw what drew her.

June tumbled, unconscious, to the ground.

And the females descended on their fallen friend.

My brother was nowhere to be found, but I knew I would see him again.

The All-Elemental had claimed him, after all.



After the coven ensured June rested peacefully, the females agreed to rest for the night before meeting to plan for the imminent arrival of the angels and how to protect Earth immortals from demons.

Now, Cassandra quietly shut the door to her room, but she continued facing it, unwilling to face *me*.

I sat on the edge of her small bed, agonized over the decisions I made, the choices that harmed my female.

I did not believe I was *wrong* for completing my duty to my kind. I could not, not when I bore a responsibility to them, to ensure their wellbeing.

But I *deeply* regretted Cassandra's pain.

She, of all beings in the realms, deserved only happiness.

Her shoulders hiked and her little fists clenched before she finally turned around.

I devoured her beautiful face with my eyes. No matter how much she loathed me, I would memorize her features and carry them with me always.

She kept her eyes downcast as she walked toward me, stopping a mere arms-length away. I did not reach for her, not when her sadness peppered the bond.

When she finally gazed upon me, the softness in her features stalled my breath.

“You fought your mother to protect me.”

I coughed around the thick emotion lodged in my throat. “Yes.”

“You... you killed her.”

“I would do it again. I would kill *anyone* for you. *Everyone*,” I whispered fervently.

She linked her fingers and twisted them. “Don’t lie to me again. Not by omission, not outright.”

Hope tightened around my heart. “I will not.”

She nibbled her lip. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I asked in disbelief.

She took the final step, her knees brushing mine. “Okay.”

I groaned in agonized relief. “I do not deserve you, sweet witch.”

She placed her hands on my shoulders and dropped into my lap, laying her head against my chest. “There’s that word again,” she murmured.

“I speak the truth. You forgive too easily.” I hated saying those words aloud, fearful she would rescind her forgiveness, but she asked that I never lie again, and I would *not*.

She cuddled closer to me. “I’m still hurt.” She threaded one hand in my hair when I stiffened. “But... I understand why you did what you did. Not the *way* you did it. I don’t accept that.”

“I know,” I rasped.

“But I *do* understand. You wanted to protect your kind. That’s kind of my whole job as a Head Coven witch. It would be hypocritical if I treated your motives as beneath my own. You had centuries building up to this moment, and even with all that, you didn’t hesitate to protect me against your queen. When she threatened me, your immediate instinct was to protect me.” She pulled back so she could reach my chin, giving it a gentle kiss that sent my heart racing. “We went through so much together in such a short time, and most of it was you building me up without any gain for yourself. Our relationship started on a lie, one that was both selfish and selfless, and that’ll probably hurt me for a while. But that doesn’t mean it erases everything that came after, and it doesn’t erase my... my love for you.”

Everything slowed. My throat tightened, and a tremble of relief danced over my frame.

Cassandra loves me.

This perfect female loves me after all I have done to her.

I wanted to fall on my knees and worship her. To slide beneath her skin and become one with her for the rest of my days.

My arms flexed around her, and I buried my face in the fragrant curve of her neck. Sucking a kiss into that tender flesh, I rasped, “I love you, witch. You are all I want. All I could never dream of having.” She tucked her face into my chest as she tightened her fingers in my hair, sending a pleasurable burn through my scalp. She rubbed her cheeks against me and mumbled.

“What did you say, sweet witch?”

She lifted her head. “You love me?” The words came out breathy, dripping with hope and disbelief.

I touched my forehead to hers. “How could I not? Even if I was not created to love you, I would. You are the most magnificent female I have ever known. You...” I coughed around a swell of emotion. “You have given me so much. I will treasure the gift of being your male. I will protect you until I am no longer of this realm or any other.” She gasped, her eyes wide and gleaming with adoration.

Holding my female in my arms for long minutes, both of us clothed and silent and languid, content to surround myself in all she meant to me, brought greater pleasure than thousands of victories.

Cassandra was the first to break our quiet.

“I can’t believe June brought the angel realm down.”

I chuckled, and to my chagrin, it came out sounding far more uneasy than amused. “She would certainly suit my brother in temperament and deed.”

After June awoke, weakened but alert, the females peppered her with questions.

The most pertinent of which was *how*.

“The demon and angel realms were connected. At least, a sliver of them. Sort of like a poorly sewn hem between realms.” June rubbed her eyes and licked her dry lips. “It was a point of weakness and connection. When the demon realm fell, the rift opening...”

“It allowed you to do the same with the angel realm,” Cassandra murmured.

I clenched my fists. Part of me wanted to pummel the female for her incomprehensible actions, but I knew it would not endear me to my mate.

So I, Prince of Deception, a male given to satisfying every one of my whims, restrained myself.

Cass snorted, drawing me back to our conversation, her features pinched. “It’s a lot of change in a short amount of time.”

I hummed in agreement. An uncomfortable thought assailed me. “Perhaps that is what immortals need. We live long lives, but we struggle to adapt, always assuming things will be as they have always been.”

She sighed and leaned more heavily against me. I gladly took that weight. “You’re right. But I think Naiya’s head almost exploded.”

Now, my laugh was genuine. “Your coven leader certainly did not find it as humorous as her mate.”

“At least the new protection spell won’t allow them to get through... we know next to nothing about angels.”

“Neither do I.” Her head snapped up, and she looked at me in disbelief. “Angels and demons have lived in separate realms for millennia. We detest each other, but at this point, it is more of a tradition than something that has any basis.”

“Like witches and warlocks.”

“Yes.”

“I guess we’ll learn more about them soon enough.”

“That appears certain,” I muttered, disliking the prospect *very* much.

Any angel that attempted to harm my female or those she loved would die *slowly*.

I *might* kill a few simply because I would enjoy it.

I captured Cassandra’s lips in mine, delving my tongue between them, stroking her, tasting her. She slid her fingers through my hair, and the sensation weakened my glamor until it dropped.

When she cupped my horns, I groaned and deepened our kiss, one hand caressing her elegant throat, sliding down her collarbone, cupping her breast.

In the haze of desire, I felt her stiffen.

Pulling away, I gazed down at her. “What ails you?”

She sucked in a shivery breath. “I-I’m sorry...”

Her conflicting feelings flowed through the bond. I could not parse them, but I did not need to. “You are still injured by what I’ve done.”

She ducked her head, hair covering her face, and I pushed it aside. “I forgive you, but my trust...”

“Trust is a fragile thing,” I said as I tipped her face up, stroking her cheek before cupping the side of her neck. “I will repair it. This I vow.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I know you will.”

Tentatively, I brushed a soft kiss on her lips. “And I will know it is done when you no longer pull away to guard yourself from me.”

We spent several minutes in comfortable silence before Cassandra murmured, “I want to offer the other Head Covens the new protection spell.”

I stiffened, and a growl rattled in my chest. “Absolutely *fucking* not.” Cassandra looked at me with tenderness, and it only raised my ire. “No, female.”

“You broke open an entire realm to help your kind. All I want to do is a little spell to help mine.”

“Little?” I snapped. “It took *ages* to complete.”

“You told me you’ve done spells that took centuries.”

Fuck. “Well—“

“And I’ll have you to protect me.”

That mollified me... somewhat.

“And we’ll be able to travel together... just the two of us.”

I perked up. “Oh?”

She grinned and nodded. *Conniving female*. Pride swelled in my chest, and she rubbed between her breasts, certainly feeling it in the bond.

“Alright, sweet witch. We shall go and rescue the Head Covens, which do not deserve your consideration, as long as you remain beside me, under my protection, at all times.”

“Always.”

CHAPTER 34

CASSANDRA

*B*lood blood blood.
Blood.

Blood.

Blood.

Goddess. After so long, the nightmares were back. I couldn't do this. I couldn't—

“Cassandra,” Raziel snapped. I shook my head, clearing it of the descending shadow.

This wasn't the time or the place to fall apart.

Not when I was in the middle of a massacre.

A massacre Raziel and June planned together, apparently.

This was their *apology* gift to me.

June felt terrible that she didn't get the vision about the rift and Raziel and I before the Elders kidnapped her. Why she thought I'd blame her for that, I didn't know.

The minute Raziel wrapped us in shadow and landed on my father's pack land, I panicked.

It took an hour for him to calm me down.

Then he went to work slaughtering everyone who ever hurt me, tearing them limb from limb, severing their heads, puncturing their lungs to listen to them gurgle.

He was quite creative.

And I didn't have to lift a finger as he dismantled everyone who used me, who took a grieving witchling and tried to annihilate her body and soul.

My father's enforcers went first, Raziel's thin, razor-sharp claws piercing their chests before his fist cracked through ribs, pulling out of the holes with a wet sucking sound, chunks of hearts splattering on the floor before the bodies collapsed into the blood-soaked ground.

It wasn't the blood itself that bothered me.

It was that I had bled in every place on this land.

And *their* blood became *my* blood, the present overlapping with memories of the past.

It was especially bad in this place.

The clearing where all important pack business was attended to was a pool of blood and discarded limbs.

Several males tried to fight back, but Raziel killed them quickly, one getting his spine partially ripped out, the white bone stark against his torn black shirt.

Another stepped forward, but his head thunked on the ground before he could lift his other foot.

And with every death, satisfaction swelled in me until it threatened to split my skin.

Everyone who died at my mate's hands deserved it.

Anyone who thought violating another was their right deserved it.

Raziel looked like an avenging angel, but only a depraved demon prince could give me this violent purge.

My cheeks started hurting, and I reached up to touch them, tracing my hands over the malevolent grin splitting my face.

In that moment, I realized Raziel was right.

I *was* perfect... for him.

When the screams stopped, he moved toward me, his fluid movements making my mouth go dry. Such a graceful male, even when he was covered in gore. The ground squelched with each step he took, the music of his absolute defeat of my enemies. He softly touched the underside of my chin, and I gazed at his otherworldly features, the only thing marring them a crease between his thick brows.

“You are *everything*, Cassandra. And *everyone* who ever harms you will die,” he murmured gently.

Raz could command, seduce, intimidate... but his moments of tenderness were what sent shivers of desire through me until they settled between my thighs. How strange it was to

fear the touch of a male, only to discover its joys with a demon.

How perfectly apt it was that the male who made me desire—who gave me pure, unadulterated, uncorrupted pleasure—was the male who also betrayed me.

And now... now he gave me this.

My nightmares torn apart in a grisly display.

“Come.”

When I didn't respond, too busy taking in the macabre sight of my father's dismembered pack, Raz wrapped an arm around my waist and guided me.

My feet moved without my input.

My gaze scanned the grounds, taking snapshots of shredded torsos, chunks of gore, sightless eyes in heads severed from their bodies, bright white bone and dark red lumps.

Raz eventually stopped, but he scooped me in his arms. I dangled limply, my mind whirring, heart pounding staccato against my ribs. He set me down, and I snapped out of my daze when I looked at my seat.

My father's *throne*.

He always sat in it during pack ceremonies and meetings.

Shifters didn't have *kings*, but he always thought himself above his station, and the raised wooden platform and oak chair fashioned to look like a royal seat with its high back and lavishly carved arms showed that better than anything.

He was a brute at all times, but the moment he planted himself in this seat, I knew true horror.

The power flowed freely through him in those times. The unmerciful violence.

Slowly, I lifted my face to meet Raz's eyes.

Two terror-stricken shifters dragged a male through the path I had just walked. When we arrived, Raziel pointed at each enforcer that came barreling at him, asking if they'd hurt me.

He killed seven before two that hadn't tried their luck.

And those, he'd had me tie with vines while he disemboweled several more shifters until our prisoners pissed themselves—literally—and agreed to do whatever my mate demanded.

What did it say about me that I smiled the entire time?

I was far more vengeful than I thought.

Now, the two males carried their burden toward us, gripping his upper arms while his legs dragged behind him.

Even from here, I knew it was Father.

My heart tripped over in my chest, and I took whistling breaths. Not enough oxygen came through my tight throat, and my vision started blurring.

I stopped breathing completely when the shifters dropped him only a few feet from me and Raziel.

“Cassandra, my sweet witch,” he purred.

I jolted, whipping my face to him. He smiled softly at me, but when he turned back to my father, his face could've been carved from stone.

“This male has committed grievous crimes against you. Now, it is you who shall determine his fate.” I gaped, widening my eyes, and Raziel's flared. He bared his teeth in a vicious smile. “What shall be the punishment for his crimes?”

I shut my mouth so hard, my teeth clicked. Inhaling through my nose, I darted a glance at my father. He was bruised, bloody, kneeling on the floor next to a pile of... entrails.

But even in his subdued state, his dark eyes bored into me. I was caught in his spiteful gaze, frightened prey, all the torment of my year under his thumb crashing down on me. I started to wheeze, an uncontrollable tremble racking my frame, and he jerked back and spat, saliva landing between my feet.

I slowly lowered my eyes to look at the wet spot as the fluid seeped between the wood planks of his precious platform.

My breathing steadied, my muscles relaxed, and my heart calmed.

I raised my head, met my father's stare, and whispered, “Death.”

Raz walked into my line of sight, obscuring the view of the male who'd gotten off on tormenting his only young, bent over so he could brush his nose against mine, his dark eyes luminous in the gathering dusk. He touched his lips to mine and breathed, “My perfect mate.”

Then he straightened and dropped his glamor before facing my father.

And the rasping, agitated pants coming from the male I'd long thought untouchable sent hot satisfaction into my bloodstream.

When Raz tore out his throat before knocking him face down on the grass so he could sever his spine, it heated to a boil.

And when my father took his last breath, I was euphoric.

CHAPTER 35

RAZIEL

Now that Cassandra's sire was dead, nerves shot through me.

Would my apology be enough for my female?

I spat on the corpse of the male who dared spit at my mate and jerked my chin at the pathetic, trembling, whimpering shifter males who only lived because they had not touched my female. "Bring the survivors here."

As the males quickly spun around to do my bidding, I faced my sweet witch.

Even hunched in the seat, she looked resplendent, her eyes bright with victory, lips turned up in a little smile.

And I knew just what to do to show my devotion.

As movement behind me indicated the pack had arrived, I continued devouring the sight of my mate.

I extended my senses, noting the terrified crowd was fifty or so paces away.

These were the males and females who did not participate in tormenting and abusing my mate, but whose cowardice, whose silence, allowed her suffering to continue.

The younglings were left alone, barred in a room in the pack house, on my orders.

Those here to bear witness deserved every horror they experienced, and several let out choked sobs as they took in my handiwork.

I greatly enjoyed killing. I took pride in my efforts, and the clearing was a monument to that.

Now they would see me worship the female they should have treated gently and know the reason for their suffering.

I stepped onto the platform, and Cassandra leaned back in the chair in surprise when I dropped to my knees before her.

She sucked in a stuttering breath when I grabbed her thighs and squeezed before jerking her to the edge of her seat. Her back arched dramatically as her neck remained fixed against the throne.

“Look at me,” I rasped. Her head dropped, showing me her lust-glazed eyes. “Do you want this?”

The question had far more meaning.

In the days since I joined her coven, Cassandra and I had not engaged in bed play. I awaited her signal that she was ready, to give me the trust in her body that I had once possessed.

I was not a patient male, but I learned to be... *for her*.

But my cock ached; the desire to join with my mate so fierce, it threatened to cleave me in two.

A fate I would suffer... *for her*.

But I wanted to imprint this place with her pleasure, freely given. I yearned to give her a memory of that ecstasy in the place that had only brought her pain.

On bated breath, I watched her face twist with emotion— indecision, desire, fear, hope, and more I could not identify.

Then her expression cleared, and what remained nearly stalled my heart.

My female is happy.

Radiant.

Her smile was soft as she ran a hand over my hair before cupping my cheek. I nuzzled into that palm, ever the eager recipient of her touch, her affection.

And when she nodded, a bestial growl worthy of my half-shifter witch rolled through my chest, darkening her eyes with arousal.

She whimpered when I used my claws to slice her pants at the seam, then ripped the hole wide, exposing her pussy.

I shoved her legs over the arms of the chair, and she slammed her hands down on the seat to steady herself, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She exhaled slowly. “What are you doing?” she whispered shakily.

She thought I would fuck her.

And I would.

But not before I had my meal.

“Feasting,” I muttered before diving into her flesh.

I split her pussy with my tongue, licking from her entrance to her clit, swirling around it before giving it a little suck. I kept my eyes pinned on her to watch her cheeks flush, her head tip back, her lips parting with pleased gasps.

With my hands keeping her thighs spread apart, I ate my mate’s pussy until it was sloppy wet, gushing slick for me.

I thrust my tongue into her tight entrance and groaned as her flavor coated my mouth.

I nipped her thigh, sucked until it bruised with my mark, then returned my mouth to her clit.

When she came with a long, low moan, her hands shooting out to grab my horns, and I moaned, flooding my pants with cum, orgasming at the first sound of her pleasure without a single touch on my cock.

And I fastened my mouth to her pussy to drink down her offering.

She shuddered with aftershocks, her breathing rapid, nipples peaked beneath the thin fabric of her shirt.

I wanted those buds between my teeth, but I would save such pleasures for when we did not have an audience.

Cassandra gradually seemed to realize a crowd of her enemies had witnessed her pleasure, and a hot blush stained her cheeks. She scooted back despite her quivering legs and ducked her head.

“No,” I barked, and her eyes shot to mine. I kept our gazes locked as I brushed my cheeks and chin over the wetness between her thighs. I wanted her slick to glisten on my skin as I faced the pack that betrayed her.

Her brows furrowed, and I grinned before biting at the bruise I left on her thigh, causing her hips to give a little jolt.

“Do not hide, Cassandra.” She tilted her head slightly, searching my face—for what, I was not sure. Then she tipped her chin in acknowledgement.

Slowly, I rose, never taking my eyes off her as I stepped back before moving beside her chair until I stood slightly behind it, as was befitting.

She sat up straighter with her hands clenched in her lap, but she did not hide.

Pride filled me.

Gratitude for the gift that was my mate.

All of it mixed with the sweet taste of victory.

I faced our enemies, dropping my glamor once again, relishing the shocked gasps and cowering.

“Bow to your queen, beasts,” I roared.

One by one, the quivering mass of impotent mutts fell to their knees and bowed.

Then... then they died screaming.

And when their music stopped, Cassandra rose from her throne and touched my arm. "Send the males away," she whispered shyly.

I raised a brow. "Why?"

She shifted from foot to foot, her eyes darting everywhere but my face, and a surge of lust and hesitation vibrated in the bond.

Slowly, a grin spread across my face. "You want to fuck on the throne, is that right?"

Her cheeks flushed, and she still would not meet my eyes, but the added flare of arousal in the bond told me all I needed to know.

"Disperse," I snapped. When the males did not immediately do my bidding, I took three menacing steps toward them.

They scurried away.

"Pests," I grumbled.

My mate giggled, the sweet sound softening my ire. "They're just afraid of you."

"As they should be," I said, puffing my chest. She giggled again, and this time, I did not find it sweet. "Are you laughing at your male?"

She ducked her head, but her mirth continued to flow.

It only stopped when I grabbed her chin and devoured her mouth, thrusting my tongue inside, licking every crevice it could reach, her laughter transforming into little moans that vibrated against my lips until I gave her an answering groan.

I wrapped an arm around the small of her back and tugged her closer, her breasts crushed against my abdomen. I always had to bend far to kiss my female despite her height, but I would bend as far as necessary for her.

As we separated, Cassandra gasped for air, and smug satisfaction surged within me... along with immeasurable gratitude that could easily bring me to my knees.

She did not believe in the word *deserve*, but I would do all I could to prove my worth to her, to ensure she never regretted forgiving me.

As her erratic breathing calmed, her cheeks flushed darker. “Will you sit?”

And I knew exactly what my female desired.

I sat so fast, my eagerness on full display, that she giggled again, and more warmth flooded the bond.

When I tore the placket of my slacks, giving my cock room to spring free, the barbs flexed, ready to pleasure my female.

And when she stripped off her pants and shirt with no hesitation, standing before me nude and glorious, I thanked her Goddess for creating this perfect little witch.

She straddled me, her knees knocking into the arms of the pitiful throne her father constructed, and I tugged her so that

she sat more comfortably atop me.

Wrapping her arms around my neck, she touched our foreheads together. “Help me,” she murmured.

I could do nothing but comply.

I held my cock aloft for her, and she sank down slowly, each inch pulling a guttural sound directly from my soul.

Hot. Tight. Wet.

Mine.

When she reached the end of me, she stilled for long moments, our lips a hairsbreadth apart so I felt every exhale as her gaze held mine.

My hips twitched, and I groaned. I had to harness every ounce of control to stop myself from pounding up inside her.

My sweet witch gave me a reprieve.

She moved over me, gentle, sensuous, each roll of her pelvis a revelation, drawing grunts and groans from me.

When she angled herself *just right*, she whimpered, her pussy soaking me with her arousal.

And my control snapped.

I slammed my hands on her waist, tugged her up, and arched my hips to thrust into her.

Every sound she made stuttered with the force of me pummeling into her.

“F-faster,” she whined.

I gave her faster, her wetness easing my way, so much of it my balls and inner thighs were slick with her.

She tossed her head back, her hair tickling my thighs, and I growled as it pushed her breasts closer to my mouth.

And I took full advantage, sucking a peak between my lips and swirling, grazing her with my sharp teeth.

“Goddess,” she cried.

I pulled off her nipple with a pop and gripped her nape, forcing her to look at me. “No,” I snapped, and her heavy eyes widened even as gasps of pleasure continued to fall from her parted lips. “My name. You say my name when I am inside you.”

Her tongue darted out, and I followed its path intently before using my tongue to match it, and she whimpered piteously. “Raziel,” she whispered.

I pumped harder, faster.

“Raziel!”

Her pussy spasmed, and I planted myself deep, reached a hand between our bodies, and stroked her swollen clitoris.

“Milk me, female. Come on your mate’s cock.”

Her head rolled on her shoulders, and I picked up the pace of my finger, our bodies slapping together. Sweat burned my eyes as it dripped down my forehead, and my balls tightened in preparation. “You want my seed, hmm?”

“Yes,” she moaned.

I gritted my teeth, so close to the edge of release, my stomach cramped.

But my witch would always find it first.

“Then take it. It is yours. It is only yours.”

Her gaze caught mine as she screamed my name.

And I filled her with cum as her pussy rhythmically clenched around me, my barbs flaring and locking so she orgasmed again and again.

She collapsed into my chest, and I hugged her close, wrapping my wings around her until our bodies stopped trembling.

“Sex is really hot when you have your clothes on,” she mumbled against my chest. I growled playfully and flexed my arms around her. She sighed in contentment. “Thank you for... for wanting more for me.”

Soft feelings filled me, and to my horror, my eyes began to burn. I opened them wide to prevent them from doing something abominable... like shedding tears.

Cassandra must have felt my discomfiture in the bond because she giggled.

I feigned outrage when she pulled back to look at me, but her pleasure-infused face was too endearing to maintain such a deception.

I nipped her bottom lip. “I do not want more for you, sweet witch. I want *everything* for you.”

She grinned. “Pretty sure I already have that.” She glanced around the clearing and grimaced. “Can we go home now?”

I hefted her up and wrapped shadows around us, not bothering to gather her shorn pants or disengage her from my cock. She gasped as it jolted within her, and I smiled wickedly. “Of course. And when we get there, I will reward you for being such a good witch.”

CHAPTER 36

CASSANDRA

“**T**he spell will soon be complete,” Raziel muttered from behind me.

We were at the compound for the Washington and Oregon Head Coven, led by our new ally, Isis. She was half shifter, too, and now that Raziel taught me to embrace my shifter side, I felt close to her in a way that didn't happen the first time we met.

As I drew the last symbol, the protection spell finally intact, I sat back on my calves, and stretched my arms to the sky.

So far, Isis was the only Head Coven leader who accepted our offer of the protection spell.

It was disheartening, but we couldn't do anything to change the prejudices our kind had toward hybrid witches. That they'd reject help because they hated our bloodlines so much...

Well, it wasn't worth dwelling on something so predictable.

I expected when the angel realm fell to Earth, we'd be getting more calls.

I brought a foot under me and nearly stumbled, my legs weak after kneeling in the dirt beneath the tree that powered Isis' coven's old protection spell.

Raziel was at my side before I tipped into the dirt, bringing me to my feet and wrapping an arm around my back until the pins and needles disappeared and strength returned to my limbs.

Isis watched us with interest. "Never thought I'd willingly allow a demon to come here," she mused, her eyes twinkling.

The fading sun slashed across her face, making her deep, dark skin shine as her full lips tipped into a grin.

I smiled back, and Raziel huffed.

"I'm glad you did," I said as I dusted my hands off on my pants.

Over the last month, not much had changed in my coven's territory.

Or... at least among the immortals there.

Humans were having a rough time. We didn't have a television at the compound, but we patrolled the territory often enough, visiting bars and restaurants occasionally, to hear that crime was on the rise by *a lot*.

In the first weeks after the realms joined, violence spread like Willow's flames.

That died down. Kaaen visited Raziel outside the new protection spell and let him know he took over ruling the

demons.

Now, most of the rising crime was thievery.

It was impossible to convince Kaaen to get a handle on that. Demons viewed it as akin to a harmless prank, and if they couldn't indiscriminately bleed humans dry, taking away their ability to steal was a nonstarter.

Lust was nowhere to be found, unfortunately.

But Raziel and Kaaen said she'd be back after she gathered forces to try to depose her brother.

I wanted her dead for what she'd done to them.

My claws began to extend, and I looked at them, dumbfounded.

I'd never get used to my shifter nature manifesting when my emotions were high.

Raziel thought my claws and fangs, far more diminutive than a full shifter, were adorable.

He especially liked when I bit and clawed him.

And he'd bite me right back.

Memories of the last time he latched onto my neck and licked the blood sent a flood of heat between my thighs, and my mate glanced at me with a wicked grin.

Isis laughed softly, her keen senses probably picking up on my desire for my mate.

That was another development... Raziel couldn't scent me before we were intimate during my heat.

When he told me that, I immediately went to Greer for answers.

Buffing an apple on her sleeve, she took an enormous bite, chewing thoughtfully. She swallowed it down and glanced between me and Raziel. "Interesting," she murmured. I could see her mind turning as she considered the possibilities. Her eyes widened slightly with dawning realization. "I think... I think it may be because you finally unleashed your beast and the full extent of your magic. That cutting off those aspects of you muted your scent somehow."

Raziel would be smug when he learned Greer agreed with his theory.

"He can't read my mind, either."

She smirked. "I'd imagine that's a gift from the Goddess. The bonds expose us enough. Can you imagine what the males would do if they knew all our thoughts? We'd never get around their overbearing, protective natures."

"What amuses you?" Raziel rumbled at my side. My vision sharpened on him, his shadows swirling around us in preparation to return to our coven.

Our coven.

Makhi officially inducted Raziel into it, explaining that "the males are of the coven as the witches are of the coven." Even though Eva called Makhi a dumbass for presuming to designate membership, Raziel looked extremely pleased by the development.

“There is that amusement again.”

“Sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “Fond memories.”

He buffed a kiss on my forehead, tucked me in his wings, and the shadows took us home.

“Still can’t fly, can you, demon?” Eva sang as we appeared in the kitchen.

Raziel muttered under his breath before stomping to our room.

I mock glared. “Must you tease him? You know demons can’t fly. It’s a sore spot for him.”

Eva looked beyond pleased. “Of course I *must*. It’s tradition.”

I rolled my eyes and sauntered after my mate.

Joking with my coven was... amazing.

I’d held myself back from them for so long, to no end but hurting myself.

I still hurt.

That would never go away. It couldn’t. Experiences, memories, they were the story written in our soul, engraved on our bones. They didn’t need to be in front of us for their essence to have left its mark.

But that didn’t mean new memories couldn’t outweigh them over time.

And I hoped I’d have a lot of time, and a lot of memories, to do just that.

When the angel realm finally fell, who knew what dangers we'd face.

The Elders might be gearing up to destroy us even now, but at least the protection spell would put a stop to that.

It was a love letter to our coven—to *me*—from the Goddess herself.

Anyone who meant us harm couldn't cross it.

We could hide out here until everything shook out.

But we wouldn't. Because there were males and females—and humans—worth saving.

When I reached the doorway to my room, Raziel greeted me with a fierce kiss, his hands cupping the sides of my neck to keep me in place, and I melted into him.

When I needed to take a breath, I pulled back slightly, our lips still touching, and stared into his dark eyes.

"I love you," he said against me, the words coiling in my heart.

"I love you, too," I whispered back.

Always attentive to my feelings in the bond, Raziel growled, "You have nothing to fear. I shall protect you from every foe."

And as I gazed at his fierce expression and weighed it against the many enemies and pitfalls in our path, no doubt weakened me.

"I know you will."

EPILOGUE

EVANGELINE

I tucked my hands in my pockets and whistled as I sauntered across the training pit. Back, straight, hips swaying, everything totally *normal*... except when I looked over my shoulder as I reached the stairs, my *surprise* so incongruous, I chuckled.

I ran a hand through my short black curls and shrugged before loping up the stairs.

When I entered the compound, I went straight to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water, screwing the lid off and chugging it.

Naiya was at the table, and I could feel her eyes boring into the side of my face, but I let her stew.

Because it was fun when she stewed. Sometimes she tried to lecture me, and I could make fun of her for being such a fucking drag.

I wasn't disappointed.

“You want to tell me why you texted me, asked me to meet you here, and are taking your sweet time telling me *why*? I have a lot of shit to do, my younglings need to be fed, Fin snuck in a pet dog last night—”

“Calm down before you pop a blood vessel, cousin,” I said with a smirk as I turned to face her. “I actually have a surprise for you.” I paused, finally processing all the words she’d spewed that I’d ignored, and laughed. “Fin got a *dog*?”

Nai’s dark blue eyes flashed with power, her expression shifting between anger and exasperation. I’d never tell her this, but it was good to see her being open about how she felt. Ever since she mated, she was softer, more vulnerable.

I loved that for her.

Now, for me?

That sounded hellacious.

“Yes,” she gritted out. “He didn’t even ask—because he knew I’d say *no*. And apparently, Makhi’s harassing Letty about getting a dog now. My mate is going to single-handedly implode my coven.”

I grinned, and Naiya glared. With a shrug, I said, “I think I may beat Fin in that regard.”

And when we reached our destination, Nai understood why.

I straightened my spine proudly and tucked my hands behind my back while she gaped and spluttered.

After several minutes of her hilarious, incomprehensible blabber, she finally turned to me.

Now, she was scowling, and my grin turned into a full-blown smile.

“What the fuck have you done?” she breathed.

I tilted my head. “I found *it* outside the protection spell, all banged up. *It* could’ve been checking for weaknesses, so I brought *it* inside. Where I could, you know—“ I waved a hand dismissively. ”—contain *it*.”

A muscle worked in her jaw, and I couldn’t stop a giggle from escaping. Nai twisted around to look at my surprise, and her shoulders slumped. “Why the fuck are you calling an angel *it*? And Eva...” She clenched her fists, and I rocked back on my heels as I took in the bruised and bloody winged bastard with the demon containment chain wrapped around its ankle.

Thanks to sweet Cass, we now knew demons and angels were related, which absolutely made my day when I dragged my prisoner down here.

It was always awesome when I had the tools to contain my prey.

“Because pests are *its*.”

“Eva,” she snapped.

“What?”

Naiya groaned and ran a hand over her long braid, taking a fortifying breath before turning back to the angel.

“This male...” She shook her head.

“Look on the bright side,” I murmured. “I’m switching things up around here.”

She shook her head again, harder this time. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

I smiled viciously. “Usually, one of us gets captured.” I walked over to the unconscious lump on the ground and kicked the chain so it jangled so prettily. “Well, to be precise, one of *you*. Not me, though.” I pointed at my chest. “I’m awesome.”

She stepped beside me and let out an aggrieved breath. “You never do anything to plan.”

“Nope,” I said, making sure to pop the p, which I knew would annoy her.

But my cousin surprised me by laughing softly. “This *is* an interesting turn of events, at least. It was starting to get boring around here.”

We side-eyed each other before cracking up.

And then the angel moaned.

I whipped my head around, and eagerness pulsed in my blood before pooling between my thighs.

The prospect of violence always made me horny.

And I was going to have *so much fun* with my prisoner.

But for now...

I stepped forward, cocked a fist back, and slammed it into his battered face.

Lights out, fucker.



Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed Cassandra and Raziel's story, please consider leaving a review, whether it's short or long. I'd be eternally grateful!



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TERMS

Earth-bound Immortals

Witches, Warlocks, Shifters, Vampires, Berserkers

Realm-bound Immortals

Angels, Demons, Fae

Witches

Coven: Group of four-to-six bonded witches.

Note: Most covens have four elemental witches because witches with cyclical magic are rare. Head Covens must have all six magicks represented.

Elemental magic: air, earth, fire, water

Cyclical magic: life (healing, sometimes clairvoyance), death (access to the death realm)

All-Elemental: Most powerful living witch. Only witch who can control all four elements.

Elder Council: Ruling elite of witchkind. Responsible for interpreting and enforcing the Known Laws. Elders must come from a Head Coven bloodline.

Head Coven: High-ranking group of witches due to powerful magical heritage. A bloodline position. Responsible for enforcing the Known Laws and protecting minor covens in their territory.

Second coven: Coven chosen by a Head Coven to rule in their stead if they are away or indisposed. Next in line for Head Coven if current Heads die and do not have progeny.

Minor coven: Lowest-ranked group of witches due to having less powerful magic

Witchlings: Witches not yet through immortal maturity.

Immortal maturity: Age at which an immortal becomes immortal. Generally occurs around the age of 20.

Note: Immature immortals are harder to kill than mortals, but far easier to kill than true immortals.

Conclave: Formal witch event only called if there is a threat to all witchkind or if a Head Coven has issued a challenge to settle a dispute.

Known Laws: Laws governing witchkind and interpreted by the Elder Council.

Unknown Laws: Laws alluded to in the Known Laws, but whose text has been lost, either due to the passage of time or the Great Bloodletting.

Great Bloodletting: Conflict that caused many covens to escape Africa, Europe and the Middle East and settle in the Americas over one thousand years ago

Note: Little is known about the Great Bloodletting; there are no witches left who survived it.

ALSO BY AMARA

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amara Rae is a writer of dark paranormal and fantasy romance, a reader of all things steamy, a worshipper of coffee, and a committed girl and dog mom. You can most often find her on Instagram posting pics of her dog and sharing funny memes.