



Bren

AN INCUBUS' MATE
BOOK THREE



TOBY WISE

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Being an incubus, Andras is no stranger to want and desire, but the feelings he has for Bren come as a surprise. There's something about him that pushes all of Andras' buttons, yet he keeps his feelings close to his chest, longing for Bren to make the first move.

Bren has lived many lifetimes as a phoenix shifter, but during that time, he's never met anyone quite like Andras. Bren has fallen for his best friend's brother, but won't admit it until Andras gives him a sign.

After an accident, Bren is rushed to his nest to regenerate, becoming a younger version of himself. He no longer has his memories and to make matters even more confusing, he's convinced that Andras is already his mate. Just maybe, this is the catalyst they both needed to finally be together.

Bren is the third and final book in An Incubus' Mate series. This book features a phoenix shifter falling for his best friend's brother, amnesia, silly moments, So. Much. Pining, knotty fun, and of course a happily ever after.

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Book cover by [Morningstar Ashley](#).

Beta Services by [Kirk](#) from LesCourt

Proofreading by Alee

Formatting by Pumpkin Author Services

For Meg. Thank you for loving my incubuses as much as I love them.

PROLOGUE

BREN

THE ESTABLISHMENT I step into is full of life and crowded with people. I walk over to the bar, just barely ducking out of the way of a woman running through crowded space, finding a table full of her friends. My reflexes are getting rusty. Twenty years ago, I wouldn't have even batted an eye at the woman, but now my knee tingles with annoyance at the sudden movement to get out of her way.

Waving down the bartender, I order myself a beer. The binder under my arm feels heavier than it should. The emotional weight of tonight leaves my body tense with anxiety. It's not every day a phoenix is reborn.

As I scan the room, my eyes land on a familiar face and I latch onto that, needing the distraction. I make my way through the bar to a table where Damien is sitting. Damien is a demon I met during a painting party that was hosted where I work. He was there with his boyfriend, an adorable man named Raphael.

"Oh! Hey, Bren!" Damien says, his eyes lighting up when he sees me. I put on an easy smile as I look up at him.

"It's nice to see you again, Damien. Is your boyfriend here?"

One of the men with Damien jumps in. "Your *boyfriend*?"

I look over at the other two people here with a frown, realizing they're identical to Damien. One of them seems to hide his horns, but the other is a spitting image of Damien. "Was I not supposed to call him that? You two seemed like

partners when I saw you at the painting party,” I say, turning back towards Damien.

“Ignore them, they’re idiots.”

“Hey!”

A tiny smile plays at my lips as I watch these three interact with each other. It’s clear to see they all adore the hell out of each other but make those feelings known through teasing. “He’s over at the bar talking to a friend,” Damien says, pointing out his partner at the bar.

I turn towards the other men at the table, holding up my hand. “I’m Bren, by the way.”

“These are my asshole brothers,” Damien says before the other two can properly introduce themselves.

“I never would have guessed,” I say with wide eyes. “You all look so different.”

“This is Gadreel,” Damien introduces, pointing towards his brother that hides his horns. Then he nods at the other one. “And this is Andras.” I hold out my hand, shaking Gadreel’s before moving over to Andras.

Andras reaches out and shakes my hand.

The world feels like it’s completely shifting. I’m completely off-balance. My eyes widen and my entire body freezes. I stare at Andras, wondering if he’s feeling this too. His pretty green eyes are just as wide as mine. The entire bar fades away, leaving just me and him. The sounds, the smells, the people, none of them matter. Nothing matters but the man sitting in front of me. I feel a connection here like I’ve never experienced before. I don’t know what it means, other than I need to know more about this man. I want to know everything. I want to know what his voice sounds like, what his life has been like until this point, I want to wiggle my way into his life in any way necessary. I want to carve a space for myself within his chest and bury myself there.

A moment later we’re letting go and the sounds around us come back into focus.

Something has shifted inside of me, but to the outside world, everything is the same.

“Do you wanna sit with us?” Gadreel asks, ushering the four of us to a table top to the side.

“Sure. I’m just meeting a friend here, but he’s not here yet,” I tell them, pointedly ignoring the binder under my arm. I run my fingers through my salt and pepper hair as my eyes dart over to Andras, just taking him in.

He’s got curly dark hair at the top of his head where his horns peak out and the most stunning pair of green eyes I’ve ever seen. I could get lost in them if I wasn’t being more careful.

“Are you on a date, Bren?” Damien asks, nudging me with his arm.

“No, no. Nothing like that,” I quickly say, looking over at Andras to make sure he’s heard that. He gives me a small smile before looking down into his beer. “One of my buddies who I’ve known for *years* is in town. We’re going to be catching up.”

None of that is a lie even if I’m withholding the most important truth. Leo is a phoenix who’s recently gone through a rebirth. Normally, we’ve tried to sync up our regeneration cycles, but this time around, we made ourselves a little bet. We decided to see who could last longer before they just couldn’t help but regenerate into a younger body. I’m only in my fifties this time around and I’m enjoying my salt and pepper hair. Sure, the sore muscles, the ear hair, and the knot I can’t seem to get rid of in my neck is a bit much, but totally worth being able to experience this walk of life and *winning* our little bet.

“That sounds great. It’s important for men your age to keep up with relationships,” Damien says with a straight face. I narrow my eyes and he finally cracks, chuckling to himself.

“A young man like yourself could learn a thing or two from your elders.”

“Like how to break a hip?”

“Like how to properly use these hips,” I say, wiggling my brows in Damien’s direction, making all three of them burst out laughing.

One of the nice things about being a phoenix is always feeling young no matter how old my body may be. The funny part is I look young for a four hundred year old guy.

“Raphael tells me you three own a candy shop? I’m sorry I haven’t been by to see it yet, I’ve been a bit busy with things.”

Gadreel clears his throat. “We offer free samples.”

Andras starts to laugh, putting his arm around Gadreel’s shoulders and squeezing him. “Look at you advertising the shop. I’m so fucking proud,” he says, pretending to wipe a tear from his eyes. Gadreel shoves him away but smiles into his beer.

“You’re welcome any time,” Damien says, his eyes darting away from us over to the bar where Raphael is standing. He’s doing his best to stay present but I can see his mind is over there with his boyfriend.

“What do you do?” Andras asks with an easy smile that immediately puts me at ease. Some of the tension I’m holding in my shoulders melts away.

I’ve only just met this man, but there’s something about him that’s drawing me in. As a shifter, I’m able to smell people on a pheromone level and Andras smells *good*. I want to bury my face against his curly hair and breathe him in all night.

“I own my own business,” I explain. “I’m an art instructor at LePage’s Paint.”

“Oh! We’ve been there before!” Gadreel says excitedly. “The three of us went when we first came to town, but I don’t remember you being there.”

“I’m not there every single night,” I say with a shrug. “I have a handful of employees that take care of things when I’m not there and during the summer I hire even more teenagers and young adults who are looking for work during summer vacation.”

Damien nods along before he's standing up, his eyes darting over to the bar again. "I'm gonna go get a refill. You guys will be okay?"

I give him a knowing look. "Go on, lover boy."

He rolls his eyes as he goes. I turn back to the other men at the table. "Now that he's gone," I say with a grin, "are those two really not dating?"

Andras leans against the table, his eyes brightening with excitement. My stomach swoops. "They're basically dating without admitting it to each other."

"They're both self-professed bad at dating," Gadreel explains, shaking his head. "They're so far gone on each other though. I'm expecting a grand announcement any day."

"They're cute," I admit softly. The three of us chit chat for a bit longer before Leo is stepping through the door. I stand up, nodding to Gadreel and Andras. "It was a pleasure meeting you both." Then I meet Andras' eyes. "I'll make sure to come visit you at the candy shop soon."

"That would be great," he says with a soft smile. As much as I'd love to stay longer, I have to reluctantly pull myself away and meet my old friend.

I make my way across the bar, sitting down at the booth with Leo. His regeneration has gone well, he looks about 20 years old, fresh out of puberty and ready to experience the world.

When a phoenix is reborn, they seek out the person they're imprinted to. Before our very first rebirth, Leo and I imprinted on each other, knowing that having each other would make each rebirth that much easier. We know someday we might gain mates and in that case, will imprint on them instead, but for now, we have each other.

Leo and I have always preferred to regenerate on our own in our own nests and once the transformation is done, we find the other. This time, Leo's rebirth was planned so I was able to set a note out for him, explaining to meet me here. It's

somewhere public so he would feel safe as his memories are a blank slate first thing after regeneration.

“Hi,” I say slowly, sitting down across from him. “How are you feeling?”

Leo stares at me for a long moment. He’s trying to figure out why me, a complete stranger, feels safe. Finally, I watch as understanding colors his features. “You’re my imprint partner?”

I nod my head. “I’m Bren.”

“I’m Leo,” he says before shaking his head. “Sorry, of course you know that already.”

“It’s okay,” I say with a warm chuckle. “I’ve brought your binder with me, to help you figure out where you are in life at the moment.” I slide the binder over, watching as he opens it gingerly, flipping through the pages.

I have my own binder at Leo’s home filled with my job, my friends, what my goals and dreams are at this point in time. I really need to go through it and update it. I haven’t even written down how I’m expanding my building because of how busy the painting shop has become.

“Thank you,” he says after a while. “I’m glad that you’re here to help me through this.”

“Not the first time,” I remind him, reaching over and squeezing his wrist. “And won’t be the last.”

It usually takes Leo about a week before his memories come back and until then, I plan on sticking close by. “Can you come stay with me tonight?”

“Gladly.” We stand up and make our way out of the bar. As I go, I *swear* I feel Andras’ eyes on me. This won’t be the last time I see him, but first, I’ve gotta take care of my imprint partner.

ANDRAS

I RUN my rag over the shelf I'm cleaning before placing all of the boxes of chocolate back into their place, careful that the newest boxes are at the back. Moving onto the next section, I pull the chocolate bunnies out of the way, wiping it down. This is one of the more boring jobs of owning a candy shop but it's something that needs to get done quite frequently. People aren't going to want to buy candy that's covered in dust.

Damien walks over, running his finger over the shelf I just finished. He hums, "I think you missed a spot."

"*I think you missed a spot,*" I repeat in a high-pitched, annoyed voice.

"Wow, real mature, Andras."

"*Wow, real mature, Andras.*"

Damien lets out an annoyed huff before stomping back over to the front of the store. I can't help but grin, feeling like I've properly won. That is, until Damien's voice rings out through our store's little PA system.

"Attention The Devil's Sweet Tooth's customers. If you see Andras, please attempt to get him laid. He's turning into a real brat."

I stand up so fast I almost smack my head into the shelf I'm cleaning. I overcorrect, just barely keeping myself from tipping over backwards onto my ass. "Are you serious right now? You can't just be yelling stuff like that, Damien! What if a customer had heard you?"

Damien leans against the front counter. “Then maybe you’d get laid?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t need to get laid! I’m perfectly fine, thank you very much!”

“Then why are you such a brat lately?”

“Maybe I enjoy being a brat? Have you thought about that?”

“Oh?”

I spin around so quickly that I do in fact tip over my pile of chocolate bunnies. They go scattering around the man who’d just spoken behind me. I stare at the bunnies on the ground before my eyes trail upwards from the man’s feet, over his body, and up to his amused brown eyes. My eyes widen when I realize this is Bren, the man I’d met at the bar a couple weeks ago.

“Umm?” I rub the back of my neck, my cheeks heating without my permission. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Apparently you don’t need to get laid and you thoroughly enjoy being a brat,” he says with an amused smirk. “Is that so? Because I have feelings about both of those statements.”

Before I can piece together a proper response, Damien is running over and pulling Bren into a tight hug. “Bren! I’m so happy you could finally visit!”

“I’ve been tied up with helping my buddy, Leo, but the moment I was free, I came over.” As my brother pulls Bren away, I quickly get on my knees and start picking up all the bunnies. My eyes follow Bren for a moment, catching a glance at the way his jeans fit over his ass. Yeah, the guy is hot, I won’t deny that.

I’m not sure what it is, but there’s *something* about Bren that pushes all of my buttons. He seems established and in control. He’s got gorgeous salt and pepper hair, brown eyes that are filled with depth, and the most adorable crow’s feet around his eyes. When he smiles, his eyes crinkle and his cheeks dimple with laugh lines. I didn’t think I was into older guys but apparently I very much am.

Or maybe I'm just into *Bren*.

Once I've picked up all the chocolate bunnies and put them back into place, I make my way to the front of the shop where Damien and Bren are chatting. Part of me wonders if I should give them their space. I don't want to intrude. The bigger part of me wants to gravitate towards Bren's space and that part wins out.

"So you're moving in with your not-boyfriend?"

Damien looks away, smiling down at the counter. He's such a sap now that he has Raphael in his life. Not that I'm complaining. It's been weird helping him move all his shit to Raphael's house, but I know this is what's best for the two of them. I couldn't be more proud.

The only downfall? Damien is set on taking over Raphael's matchmaking job and trying to push Gadreel and I into finding love. As much as I appreciate the sentiment, Damien should be leaving this to his mate who's *much* better at it.

"We've already been introducing Raphael's cats to Mister and everything seems to be going really well."

"I called it from the start," Bren says with a grin. "Anyone with two eyes could see you two were meant to be."

"Whatever," Damien murmurs, pushing the conversation away from himself. He notices me and smirks. "What about you, Bren? Do you have a mate?"

My stomach swoops at the question. "I don't," he says, shaking his head. Am I being weird by finding his answer relieving? I shouldn't be silently pining for him! "I'm living the bachelor life at the moment."

"Must be hard to find people who want to date a grandpa."

"Damien!" I gasp out, surprised by his comment. Bren on the other hand starts laughing his ass off.

"Listen here, sonny," he says, starting to talk like a stereotypical old man. The tips of my lips turn up. "You'd do wise to learn to respect your elders. Plus, with age comes experience on how to properly use your tongue for—"

“Alright, alright,” Damien cuts him off with an amused chuckle. “Don’t say anything that might scare a customer away.”

“PG in the shop. Got it,” Bren says, nodding his head. When he looks over at me, our eyes meeting, I can’t help but wonder why my heart skips a beat. I barely know this guy and yet I’m drawn to him like nothing I’ve experienced before. The fact that he’s single serves to spark some hope within me. Just maybe we can get to know each other and see if this spark actually leads to something.

“PG in the streets, rated X in the sheets,” Damien murmurs. He wrinkles his nose. “I’ll workshop it.”

Bren looks at the glass case we have at the front of the shop. “What’s in there? Why would you need to lock up candy?”

“That’s our adult section,” I explain. “Laced candy, magic candy, and there’s also some silly stuff that’s not suitable for kids. Like asshole chocolate.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

I snort with amusement. “Yeah, they’re little sets you can buy to make a mold of your asshole and then make it into chocolate.”

“A whole new meaning to the whole ‘eat my ass’ thing,” Damien says with a grin. “I found it in a catalog and had to get it. Not a single person has bought one yet, but still totally worth the investment.”

Bren leans against the counter, squinting as he looks into the case. “I’ll take some of the laced gummies you have. After the couple weeks I’ve been through, I can use a little extra something to relax.”

Out of habit, Damien takes out the giant binder we have, letting us know how old each species needs to be to buy adult substances. We can never remember so this thing is really handy to have on hand. He flips to the shifters. “You’re over 21, right?”

Bren gets an amused look on his face. “I might be just a tad over that. Do you need to see my ID?”

He starts reaching for his wallet but Damien shakes his head. “No, we’re all good.” He turns to the glass case, pulling out a couple of packages. “I have one that’s an all body relaxant, and one that helps with sleep.”

“Perfect. I also really want some Nerds.”

“You’ll find the biggest one right next to you. But he *does* have a name, Bren.”

I cross my arms over my chest, pretending to be upset with my brother. “You think you’re so funny.”

“I don’t *think*. I know.”

“Give your brother some slack,” Bren says giving me a quick wink that turns my insides to goo. “Even a broken clock tells the right time twice a day.”

“Hey!”

After Bren has bought his gummies and large bag of Nerds, my brother asks, “are you busy this weekend?”

“What’s this weekend?”

I watch in absolute wonder as my brother’s cheek heat up with a blush. “So you know my not-boyfriend?” When Bren grins, Damien goes on. “Well, we may or may not have moved in together and are having a little get together. You wanna come along?”

“Hell yeah I do. Congrats, Damien. I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks, man. Give me your phone. I’ll put my number in and send you the address.”

Bren takes out his phone, handing it over to Damien. I’ll get his number from Damien later. Unless that’s weird. Is that weird? No, I’m sure it’s fine.

“Will you be there?”

I nod my head, doing my best not to squirm despite the way my insides light up on Bren wanting to know if I'll be there. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Great. I look forward to spending time with you all," Bren says, but he doesn't look at Damien, only me. His smile makes my insides light up like a firework lighting up the night sky.

After getting his phone back, Bren says his goodbyes with promises to see us soon. I can already tell Bren is going to be a fixture in our lives. The way he clicks with my brother is easy to see. If he becomes my brother's best friend, does that mean he's off limits? Fuck, I hope not.

BREN

I WRAP the blanket around myself tighter as I sink into the couch. I hear a few snuffles beside me but I pretend not to notice. It's some sort of bro code not to call out your bro for crying during a romcom.

The last few months have been going great. Leo is back on his own, doing well with this regeneration. Things felt like they were coming back slower than the last time but after a few weeks, he was right as rain. I keep thinking about how I need to redo my binder, but thinking about it is as far as I get. I've got time. Plenty of time.

Plus, that's without thinking about the budding relationships I'll need to add to the binder. I need to include Damien, the incubus who has become my closest friend. We clicked so instantly and our bond became so strong. I need to include Mia, the woman who works at the animal shelter with Damien's mate, Raphael. I need to include Gadreel and Levi who've become fixtures in my life.

I need to include Andras.

What the fuck do I even put in there for him through? It's not like anything has happened between us. No yet anyway. 'Dear binder, I'm completely and utterly smitten by my best friend's brother but he has no idea so I simply long quietly at a distance hoping someday he'll show me a sign that he maybe likes me too'. Yeah, I'm not doing that. Why put things in there until something a bit more solid happens?

I carefully reach over and pull a tissue from the box before handing it over to Damien without a word. He takes it gratefully, his eyes never leaving the screen.

I smile to myself. I'm so thankful that Raphael pushed Damien and I together. Ever since their house warming party a few months ago, I've become a semi-permanent fixture on their wall. Damien and I are thick as thieves to everyone's annoyance. There's something about him that makes me feel safe and seen. He allows me to just be myself instead of this old, wise man that some people think of me as. When I'm around him, I feel young again. He's genuinely becoming my best friend, which feels a little strange since I'm so old, but hey, whoever said you can't teach an old dog new tricks never met a phoenix.

I'm over here at Damien and Raphael's house frequently. I even have an extra set of clothes that stay here, just in case I ever need it. When they have family get-togethers, I'm always invited. I love these two and I know without a doubt that they love me too.

Damien's brothers are amazing and I'm quite enjoying watching Gadreel fluster and stammer over the cute security guard at the mall. They seem so different yet somehow they fit together so well. Although, the same could be said about Damien and Raphael. Maybe that's what these incubi triplets look for in a mate, the opposite of themselves.

Not that it matters to me. Nope. I'm just Damien's best friend. I have no stake in the matter.

Okay so maybe that's not true. I can't even convince myself of that lie.

My stomach warms as I think about Damien's brother, Andras. Ever since our first meeting, I can't seem to get him out of my head. He's sweet and funny. He's incredibly handsome. He regularly brings me Nerds. What more could I possibly want in a mate?

"It's just so beautiful," Damien murmurs, his voice thick from crying. "The way they end up finding each other. Everything was pulling them apart but their love persisted."

“You’re such a sap now that you’re settled down.”

Damien turns a glare my way, wiping at his nose. “You didn’t even know me before Raphael. Shut the fuck up, Bren.”

I chuckle fondly, shaking my head. “You’re right. It really is beautiful.”

“I want you to have that,” he says seriously.

“I’ll get it someday,” I tell him. I leave out that I’m hoping I’ve already found it. Is that part of the bro code? Not dating your best friend’s brother? I’m sure he won’t mind... right?

Damien turns the TV off once the movie is over. After making sure his face is dry, he turns on the lamp beside us. I blink a few times, letting my eyes adjust.

“Do you wanna stay here tonight? It’s already pretty late and I don’t want you driving home. Your old man eyes will be terrible in this darkness.”

I sit sideways with my back against the arm of the couch. I kick his hip, narrowing my eyes. “I’m literally a shifter. I have incredible eyesight.”

“Even at your age? You can be honest with me, Bren.”

“You’d be surprised what someone my age is capable of,” I say, wiggling my brows. “The things I’ve learned over the years. The way I can make just about anyone moa—”

Damien stands up, stretching his arms over his head and letting out an obnoxious yawn to cut me off. “Alright. That’s enough out of you. I should really hit the hay.”

“Since you’re so worried about me, I’ll stay the night as long as I can use your shower in the morning?”

“Yeah, of course. My shower is your shower.”

“Thanks.”

“Good night, Bren. Love you, man.”

“Love you too,” I say, my chest bursting with warmth. I’ve never found it difficult to find sleep no matter where I am, something that admittedly comes with age. Not that I’ll ever

admit that to Damien. I get myself comfortable before falling asleep.

In the morning, I get up before Damien and make my way to the bathroom and run myself a shower so hot that within minutes the bathroom is filled with steam. I set a little bottle on the counter before jumping in. The water is scorching, just the way I like it. Cleaning myself quickly, I smile to myself as I start preparing the little gift I've brought my best friend. Leaning out of the shower, I snag the little bottle from the counter. I open the top of Damien's three in one body wash and shampoo bottle.

He's brought this on himself with this three in one routine. The man needs to learn that shampoo, conditioner, and body wash should be three separate things!

I take the blue dye and let it drip into the bottle before quickly screwing the top back on. I give it a good shake, making sure it's properly mixed up. Thankfully, this brand that Damien uses is already tinted blue so he shouldn't suspect anything until it's too late. With a prank set in place, I turn off the water and quickly dry myself off.

After getting into clean clothes, I make my way out of the bathroom and head towards the kitchen. I whistle to myself, completely at ease and excited for the day.

"Morning!" I say with a grin as I find Raphael already up and making a pot of coffee.

"Good morning, Bren. How was the movie last night?"

"You missed out on a good one. A real feel-good story with a wonderful happy ending."

"I might have to watch it on my own the next time Damien has to close."

Raphael holds up the coffee pot once it's done brewing, silently asking if I want a cup. "No thanks. I'm gonna stop for a frozen coffee on my way to work."

"Do you have any parties on the books today?" Owning an art studio has been a dream of mine since I was a young man in my very first life and now that I'm actually doing it, I'm

quite literally living my dream. I get to day-dream and draw all day, helping people discover the joys of painting.

For the majority of my work, I get a lot of walk-ins. They pick out a ceramic from the variety we have on stock, sit down and paint it, and then come back for it in a week after we've put it through the kiln. We also offer different classes as well as different sized canvases if they'd prefer to just paint on them instead. I barely feel like I'm *working*.

"No classes today but I have a feeling we'll get a handful of walk-ins. Now that fall is in full swing, there's less parents bringing in their kids since they're in school but I still get adults who stop by during the day."

"That sounds really fun," Raphael says as he pours himself a cup. I watch with a little smile on my face as he makes a second cup, preparing it for Damien. I can hear the shower start up which is my signal to start getting ready to leave in a mad dash. "I need to stop by again one of these days. I had so much fun the first time."

"Maybe next time you can come to a different sort of class. Have you ever thought about trying your hand at pottery?"

"I didn't realize you did pottery classes! Do you bring out pottery wheels and everything?"

"I provide everything you'll need. It comes with the class fee and of course you get to keep what you made no matter how lumpy it is."

Raphael chuckles warmly. "That sounds amazing. Next time you have sign-ups for that, please let me know."

"Will do," I promise. I start backing away from the counter and stepping towards the door. "Well, I should really get going. It was a pleasure as always, Raphael."

Raphael's eyes narrow. "Why are you out of here in a hurry? Don't you want to say goodbye to Damien?"

"I've left him a bit of a parting gift. One that will be much better enjoyed if I'm not here."

“What does that even mean?” Before I can answer, the shower is shutting off. I take another step back.

“Umm,” I start to say, rubbing at the back of my neck when a scream comes from the bathroom. I can’t help but grin. Success!

“What the fuck?”

“Bye, Raphael!” I hear Raphael curse behind me as I race out the door and into my jeep, giggling the entire way. Starting up my jeep, I pull out onto the road towards town. I can’t wait to hear about the fallout of this particular prank. I have a feeling *someone* will be calling me soon. A little part of me hopes it’ll be Andras.

I make my way through a coffee shop drive thru, ordering myself a frozen white chocolate drink, one of my all-time favorites. It doesn’t matter how hot or how cold it is outside, I’ll always get my coffee frozen if I can. Maybe it’s because I’m a phoenix but I’ve always run hot which means I can have frozen coffee even when it’s snowing out.

With a coffee in hand, I make my way to my shop, LePage’s Paint. Juggling my sketchbook and coffee, I get the door unlocked and flip on the lights. I take a deep breath, smiling as the scent of acrylic paint hits my nose. Maybe not everyone’s favorite scent but it makes my chest warm. It’s become one of my most comforting scents.

I set my keys, sketchbook, and coffee down by the register, going about my opening routine. I have to make sure I have money in the register from the safe and the stations have clean supplies. As I go, I flip on the radio, turning it up so I can sway to the music as I work. My morning setup is like second nature at this point and I lose myself in the routine of it all.

It doesn’t take long before everything is set up and ready. I head to our backroom, finding the kiln finished with its latest cycle and completely cooled down overnight. I open it up and start to carefully take all of the finished ceramics out of it. The glaze fire did its job well, finishing these pieces completely. I lay them into different piles, making sure they’re next to their matching slips, making it easier for me later to bag these up

for their respective owners. Once that's done, I'll send out alerts that let people know their ceramics are ready for pickup.

I load the kiln up again, this time with some ceramics that have been completely dried but haven't been painted yet. This cycle will dry them out and prepare them to be painted. After starting up that cycle, I head back to the main area, plopping myself down behind the register.

Sipping my iced coffee, I flip open my sketchbook and pick up a couple of colored pencils that I keep at the desk. I lose myself in my sketch. Splashes of green and brown cover the page and before I realize I'm doing it, I'm coloring an abstract vision of Andras' eyes.

Fuck me.

I flip back a few pages, my cheeks heating with embarrassment as I realize the last handful of pages are all him. His eyes, his face, his horns. Hell, I even have a sketch of his tail.

They're mostly abstract but there's at least one full sketch of his face. It's obvious I have it bad for this guy. Am I going to finally do something about this crush? Or am I just going to keep silently pining while keeping him at arm's length?

Thankfully, I don't need to answer that question as a group of people have just stepped into the shop. I focus on them instead of the dilemma I've found for myself.

ANDRAS

SITTING behind the register of The Devil's Sweet Tooth, I take out my phone, flipping it around in my hand. My heart is up in my throat. I want to text Bren. I want to ask how his day is going. Why am I being all nervous about it? We're friends. We text all the time. It's no big deal.

Because you want it to be a big deal.

Well, that's unhelpful. Fuck off inner voice trying to be rational about all of this!

I send off a text, asking him how his day is going. A smile stretches across my face when I get a response right away.

Bren: *Today has been soooo boring. Except something in the kiln exploded and I thought I was about to die.*

Andras: *wtf! That would scare the piss out of me.*

Bren: *It happens sometimes. One of the ceramics wasn't dried properly and the heat of the kiln blew it up. Just another day in the life of pottery.*

Andras: *When disaster strikes my shop it's a kid not getting what they want and throwing a tantrum. Your day sounds way more exciting.*

Bren: *<image>*

I open the image, my eyes widening at what I see. Holy shit! I didn't realize Bren was an actual artist! It should be obvious, he owns a fucking painting shop. But I've never seen any of his actual art work.

The image looks like a close up shot of dark curls with a pink flower crown atop the person's head. My chest warms as I look at the image, overwhelmed by how impressed I am. It's *beautiful*. I stare at it for a long time, so long that another text comes through.

Bren: *I'm taking your silence as you being awestruck.*

Andras: *You should! This is amazing! Holy shit!*

Bren: *Thank you, this is feeding my ego. I can feel my head getting bigger by the second.*

A grin spreads across my face. I quickly save the image onto my phone, wanting to be able to look at it again later. I zoom in on it one more time, my stomach fluttering when I realize... are those horns nestled between the curly hair and flower crown? No, it can't be right?

Andras: *It's beautiful. Just like me ;P*

Bren: *Can't really argue with that.*

My stomach turns a somersault so intense I feel like my knees might actually buckle. My eyes snap to the front of the shop when I hear a commotion coming from the main area. Gadreel is standing behind a display, his eyes wide as he watches whatever is happening out there.

A few moments later, Gadreel is moving. To my delighted surprise, Nick comes walking in. Well, maybe walking isn't the right word. He comes stumbling in, plowing into Gadreel until they're both on the ground. Jesus, when will these two get their shit together and admit they're meant to be?

Getting an idea, I quickly open the glass case behind myself, finding the perfect chocolate to help take the edge off. Maybe this will be just the thing they need to let themselves have this.

"Umm, like a date?"

"Do you want it to be?"

I roll my eyes as I step closer, listening to these two dance around each other.

“If *you* want it to be.”

“He does,” I say, stepping over to them and chuckling when Gadreel jumps in surprise. “Here.” I hand the chocolates over to Nick. “Take this with you. You can go right now, spend some time together before dinner,” I tell them, pushing Gadreel out the front of the shop.

“But I need to help close. And Nick probably isn’t done with his shift!

Nick gives the two of us a grin. “I’m actually all finished up for the day.”

“And I can close alone.” I give him another playful shove. “Go. Have fun, Gadreel.”

“Umm, okay then,” my brother finally murmurs, his cheeks brightening as he looks towards Nick. “I guess we can go? If you want?”

Nick places his arm around Gadreel’s back and the two of them are on their way. I smile to myself as I watch them go. I want my brother to have this. He’s closed himself off for far too long, still heartbroken about his last girlfriend. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive that fucking siren for what she said to Gadreel. I can see already that Nick is going to take care of Gadreel and handle his heart with care.

As I walk back to my station behind the register, I pull my phone back out.

Andras: *You’ll never guess what just happened...*

Bren: *A flying pig stole all your gummy bears?*

Andras: *...what?? Bren, are you high?*

Bren: *Not unless my coffee had something extra special in it!*

Andras: *Gadreel just left with Nick 0.0*

There’s a pause which works out great because a customer just walked in. I keep an eye on them as they look over the shelves of candy before checking them out when they’re all done. After they’re on their way, I check my phone again.

Bren: *REALLY??*

Bren: *You can't leave me in such suspense! What happened? Give me all the details!*

Andras: *Sorry! I had a customer! They left together after awkwardly agreeing to having a dinner date. It was equal parts adorable and cringey XD*

Bren: **wipes tears from eyes* they grow up so fast...*

Andras: *Alright, old man ;p*

My cheeks hurt from how wide I'm smiling. I love talking with Bren. It feels like we're in sync. Our humor plays off each other and we get along without really needing to try.

Maybe one of these days I'll actually admit to myself that I have a big ol' crush on Bren.

Today's not that day.

Andras: *What are you doing tonight?*

Bren: *My schedule is clear. Why?*

Andras: *Come hang out with me? We can watch a movie or something?*

Bren: *What time should I head over?*

Andras: *Around 8?*

Bren: *It's a date! :)*

My traitorous heart skips a beat. Why doesn't it get the memo that we're just buddies? He's my brother's best friend and doesn't mind hanging out with me. The sooner I get that through my thick skull the better.

Andras: *See ya tonight!*

I toss my phone under the counter before getting to work with the closing routine. It's been a weirdly slow day so I don't sweat closing a little bit early. I want to get home and shower before Bren comes over. Not because I'm trying to impress him. Nope. Of course not, that would mean I have *feelings* and I've already established that I'm simply not thinking about that yet.

Bren is a shifter, it's only kind that I shower the scents of the mall away. Yeah! I'm aware that I'm rationalizing and putting my feelings into an unreachable box inside my head but that doesn't stop me from actively doing it.

I'll deal with it in the future. For now, I'm happy to be a dog getting table scraps, happy with whatever attention or affection that Bren tosses my way.

AS SOON AS I get home, I check my phone. I've got a half hour before Bren is supposed to be here. That's plenty of time for me to shower.

After tossing all my shit on the kitchen table, I make my way to my room. I ignore the way this place feels so empty without my brothers here. I'm single by *choice*, not because I can't get a date. If I wanted to, I could totally stop at a bar and pick someone up. I've had plenty of partners in the past and been on many, many dates. I'm just enjoying the single life. It has nothing to do with my silent pining.

I throw my clothes off and into a pile in my closet, picking out some clean clothes and heading to the bathroom. I turn some music on with my phone, filling the quiet house with sound. I turn the shower on and jump in.

Despite wanting to make this quick, I sit under the hot water, just enjoying the feel of it against my body. My muscles all relax. I tip my head back, letting my hair get wet, letting it run over my face. When I open my eyes again, I look down and find my cock filling with blood.

Fuck, that's going to be annoying when Bren is here. I can't be pining *and* horny!

I bite my bottom lip as I wrap my hand around my hardening dick. Surely I have time to take care of this before Bren gets here, right. I'll get my rocks off and it'll take the edge off, it'll help me remember that Bren is just my *friend*.

The music changes to something a bit darker, a bit sexier. Like a sign from the universe that I should enjoy myself.

I begin to stroke my dick. I pull my skin back, using my thumb to swirl around my exposed cockhead. Pleasure warms me all over, a shiver running down my spine. My other hand skims over my stomach and up to my nipples, taking one of them between my finger and thumb, rolling it until it's pebbled and hard. Pleasure stirs in the pit of my belly, like a slow ember simmering just under the surface.

Once I'm completely hard, I squirt some conditioner into my hand, making the slide over my cock that much more smooth. It feels so good. My breathing picks up speed and my stomach quivers.

I try to keep my thoughts completely blank, instead focusing on the pleasure I'm giving myself, but that only lasts for so long. Once I'm stupid with lust, my thoughts begin to wander without my permission.

I close my eyes, picturing myself flat on my bed, my hands tied behind my head. Bren is over me, staring down at me with that dazzling smile of his, his glasses framing his face. He's riding me, slowly, torturing me with how slow he's going. My breath catches and my hand tightens around my cock.

Gods, is that how he would be in bed? As playful yet in control as he is when we hang out? Would he whisper that I wasn't allowed to come no matter how much I begged?

My cock jolts in my hand, imagining not being allowed to come without permission. Fuck, I wonder what it would feel like to hear Bren tell me I was good, that I was his? My orgasm is rushing towards me and I don't hold myself back despite the fantasy of denial.

My tail slaps the shower wall, the bang louder than the music filling the air. To keep it from distracting me, I bring the tip up to my mouth, pressing it between my lips. I moan around my tail, always enjoying the feeling of something in my mouth. It presses down on my tongue and I suck on it greedily, picturing myself on my knees for Bren. Would he like that? Using my mouth however he sees fit?

I lean my forearm onto the shower wall, my right hand speeding up as I stroke myself. A noise of pleasure escapes my

lips, the sound muffled from my tail. I look down, watching the tip of my cock slide through my fist over and over and over again, growing pinker as I go.

Fuck, this feels so good. I'm already so fucking close. I know I need to hurry this up and finish up before Bren is here but there's a tiny part of me that slows things down, wanting to enjoy this despite the risk of him overhearing me.

Honestly? The idea of him overhearing me sparks a flame in my gut. Maybe if he heard me whimpering his name around my own tail, he'd think about joining me in the shower and I wouldn't have to worry about whether he actually liked me or not. I want him to take the decision from me, to skip over this pining and head straight into something more.

Green wisps dart around my head and I open my mouth even wider, letting them between my lips past my tail. They sink into me, filling me with warmth. Feeding from myself is something I'm used to doing, it's satisfying, but only for a little while. I know very soon I'll be craving more.

I push my tail a bit deeper, flattening the head and making it wider, wanting to make my mouth feel even fuller than it already does. When the very tip touches the back of my throat, I push it even further until I'm just barely keeping myself from gagging. My stomach quivers in pleasure at the feeling. The back of my throat tingles for a moment before it's constricting. I cough around my tail, pulling it back to play with my tongue, giving myself a breather before doing it all over again.

The hand against the shower wall moves from the wall to my hair, tugging on the strands before wrapping around my horn. I squeeze until I'm crying out, assaulted by too many sensations at once, yet needing just a little more.

My eyes are clenched shut so tightly that I'm starting to see stars dance behind my lids. The grip around my cock tightens almost painfully and it's moving so fast it's nothing more than a blur. Fuck, I'm so close.

I spit my tail out, crying out in pleasure. "Fuck!"

Panting, I close my eyes again, picturing Bren stretched out in my bed, surrounded by my things. His eyes are shining brightly through his glasses, a smirk stretching across his lips. I'm between his legs, my mouth working him over, my hands touching his stomach and chest. I want this. I want this more than I'm willing to admit.

The fantasy Bren reaches down, wrapping his fingers around my horns, fucking my mouth. "Bren!" Lightning bolts of pleasure sparks down my spine and I'm lost in the fantasy, letting the pleasurable waves wash over me. I come so hard that my knees just barely keep from buckling.

Wouldn't that be a sight? Bren finding me passed out in the shower, my dick in hand.

I tighten my grip around myself, squeezing around the head, milking every fucking drop from myself before finally letting go. My body goes limp and I lean my side against the shower wall, letting the hot water wash over me as I come down from the high of orgasm.

Should I feel bad that I just thought about my brother's best friend while masturbating?

I add this to the other things I'm simply not thinking about right now.

I quickly finish my shower, washing my hair and making sure to get all the cum down the drain before getting out and toweling off. My tail flicks back and forth lazily, my entire body feeling content and sated. Checking my phone, I almost fucking slip when I notice the time. Fuck, Bren is going to be here any second.

Throwing my towel around my waist, I quickly run from the bathroom to my bedroom. I skid to a halt when I see Bren standing in the kitchen. It would normally be comical, watching me slide on the hardwood from still being a little wet from my shower, but this is not normal circumstances. The man I'm crushing on is here and I'm wearing nothing but a towel! Fuck me sideways.

My face blooms bright red. His eyes dart down to my towel and then slowly make their way back up, looking at my naked chest. I swear I can *feel* his gaze caressing my skin and I desperately hope he likes what he sees. When his eyes finally meet mine, he raises his brow.

“Unless you’re going to invite me into your room with you, you better get your ass dressed quickly,” he says with a warm chuckle. “I was promised vegging out tonight, Andras!”

A stunned noise leaves my throat and I do my best to cover it with a laugh. He’s obviously joking, right? There’s no way he actually wants me to invite him into my bedroom. Jesus, I usually have such better game than this. “Give me a minute, old man! Some of us actually enjoy our showers.”

I swear I hear him murmur something as I shut the door behind me that sounds like *I bet you did*, but I can’t be sure, what with my pulse pounding in my ears.

Fuck, that was a close call. If I’d taken any longer in the shower, Bren absolutely would have heard me cry out his name. I take a deep breath, focusing on calming my racing heart as I quickly get myself dressed. Now that the simmering edge of arousal is sated, hopefully I can focus on spending time with Bren.

BREN

“I FUCKING BET YOU DID,” I murmur to myself, turning away from Andras’ door and heading deeper into the kitchen. I take a deep breath and immediately regret it as I get the thick, overwhelming scent of Andras’ pleasure. My own body reacts to it, warming all over. My cock stirs with interest but I do my best to keep myself calm.

Didn’t he realize my shifter nose would pick that up? That my shifter hearing would hear him call out what I was almost positive was my name? Was he doing this on purpose to torture me?

My offer to follow him into his room left my lips before I could even stop myself, the smell of his cum and pleasure wafting through the bathroom door was making my brain go haywire. I played it off as a joke, chuckling despite the way my heart was racing and my inner phoenix was screeching at me to ask seriously and following him into his room.

And that’s without even thinking about the sight of Andras in nothing but a fucking towel! He’s so fucking toned and sexy. His tail flicked out from the bottom of his towel and gods, when he turned around all I could think about was that tail trailing just a bit higher so I could see his ass.

I step over to the sink, turning the cold water on. I take my glasses off, setting them on the counter before splashing my face with cold water, calming myself down. Thank Christ this body is so mature, otherwise I’d have a hard time hiding a boner around Andras. The thought of having met Andras

during a time when I still regularly went into rut makes me shudder. I would never have survived that.

After getting myself a glass of water, I lean against Andras' counter, waiting for him to emerge from his room. When he finally comes out, he's wearing black sweats and a red hoodie that says *Bite Me* on the front. My inner phoenix is on board with that particular message.

Down, boy.

"Sorry about that," Andras murmurs, walking over to the fridge and throwing it open. "I wanted to get a quick shower in before you got here to spare your nose but I got carried away."

I tilt my head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"Oh," Andras straightens, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I just know your shifter nose probably wouldn't appreciate all the scents of the mall," he explains with a shrug.

Oh my gods. How is he so fucking adorable?

My heart clenches at the idea of Andras not wanting the smells of the mall overwhelming me while we hang out. No one's ever thought about that before. I want to wrap him up in a giant hug or pull him in for a soft kiss.

I need to shut that train of thought down before I get myself into trouble.

"Thanks," I say, giving him a soft smile. "So, do you have any snacks?"

That does the trick, changing the topic and putting us both at ease, focusing on something that's not whatever weird tension is building between us. Andras shows me the pantry where all the snacks are stored and I riffle through, finding a bag of Cheeto puffs. I pull that out along with the box of Fruit Loops that was hiding way at the back.

"Do you want a bowl or some milk with that?"

I shake my head. "I'm just gonna eat them out of the bag by the handful."

Andras stares at me with a look of horror on his face. “Really?”

“Mhmm. Best way to eat them. Might mix them with the Cheetos.”

“Okay, now you’re just fucking with me.”

I smile. “Me? Fuck with you? That doesn’t sound like something *I* would do.”

“You literally turned my brother blue. Fucking with people is kinda your thing.”

With my arms full of snacks, I turn towards Andras. “Yeah, other people. I don’t find the same spark when I think about fucking with you.”

Andras pauses, turning away from the microwave and staring at me. He blinks slowly before a soft smile is sliding along his lips. “I find that I’m okay with that.”

“Good,” I say right away. I quickly grab my glass of water and head over to the living room. I have got to keep it together. If I’m not careful I’m going to say something I might regret.

Why the fuck can’t I just admit that I have feelings for Andras? It would be so easy to look at him and tell him the truth, that I felt a spark the moment we met and that spark has only grown the more I get to know him. At the very worst, he’d admit he doesn’t see me like that and at the very best, we’d finally get to do the smoochy smooches. Why the fuck am I holding myself back?

It can’t just be that Damien is my best friend and fucking his brother would be weird, right? Gods, do I need to start this whole relationship by talking to Damien first? Would that finally get the wheels spinning inside my head, letting me feel like this was okay? Fuck, this is so confusing.

This is getting ridiculous. I’m too old to be having these inner wars raging inside of myself! One would think that with age came a bit of clarity about relationships, dating, and love, yet somehow Andras makes me feel like I’m on my very first life, experiencing these things for the very first time. One of the many things I like about him.

I find a spot on the couch, leaning my back against the arm with one of my legs stretched out on the couch. Andras sits on the opposite end, mirroring my pose. When his leg bumps against my own, sparks race up my leg until they settle warmly in the pit of my belly.

“What do you feel like watching? There’s that new zombie movie. It looks ridiculously campy.”

“I love a terrible zombie movie,” I tell him, getting comfortable and popping open the fruit loop box. Andras grabs the remote and clicks on his streaming app. A moment later he’s pulling up the movie and hitting play. I grab a handful of Fruit Loops, popping a few in my mouth and crunching happily on them. I can feel Andras’ eyes on me. “What?” I murmur through a mouthful of cereal. Honestly? I get why this box was at the very back of the pantry. This shit is stale.

“Nothing,” he says, a little smile on his face. He turns back to the screen, munching on his popcorn. As the opening credits flash across the screen, I put the cereal box down, craving something a bit more salty now that I’ve finished my stale cereal binge.

I adjust my seating, sliding across the couch. I grab Andras’ legs, putting his ankles in my lap as I steal some of his popcorn. He chuckles softly but doesn’t comment on my desire to steal his snack.

The movie is pretty fucking awful. The plot makes no sense, the editing is janky and a few scenes seem like they were cut in the wrong order, and the actors are incredibly unlikeable. The hand not reaching into Andras’ bowl is resting on his ankle, my thumb rubbing random patterns into his skin. It started happening without any thought but now that I’ve noticed it, I can’t seem to stop.

Andras’ leg hair is soft from the shower. I’ve never been a fan of feet but his are, dare I say it, cute. His toenails are painted black and well taken care of. If it wouldn’t be weird I’d see if the hair on the top of his feet is as soft as his leg hair, but I’d rather not freak Andras out by touching his feet.

Eventually, the movie becomes too much. We're only about halfway through and I'm completely checked out. I tilt my head against the back of the couch and turn towards Andras. "Hey," I whisper. When he doesn't respond, I tug on his leg hair.

Andras' head snaps over towards me, his eyes wide. "What the fuck, Bren?"

"Sorry," I say with a chuckle. "Wanted your attention."

"You have it. What's up?"

"This movie sucks ass."

"I will literally never get over how fucking immature you are."

I grin from ear to ear. "Thank you! I've found that it's important to stay feeling young no matter how old you are."

"Such sage advice," Andras says, his voice clearly teasing. I tug on his leg hair again in retaliation and it makes him laugh. He uses his toe to poke my stomach. This easy going thing we have going between us makes my chest warm pleasantly. I feel like I could sit here all night, chatting about anything and everything without getting bored.

My eyes dart over to the TV and I groan. "They've already established that zombies can't run and yet somehow that one just leaped twenty feet into that tree to get that guy? This movie makes no sense."

"I think they're establishing that the zombies are evolving but they don't do a great job of that."

"Do you think there's such a thing as zombies but we just don't realize it? Like a race of undead who live among us?"

Andras bites his bottom lip, thinking about it for a moment before shrugging. "Wouldn't surprise me. Plus, I'm sure there's realms we haven't connected with yet. There might be a realm completely filled with undead people just living their best lives."

"Unlike that guy," I murmur at the TV, glaring as a zombie with no jaw or teeth tries to eat a random squirrel.

Andras snorts in amusement. “Why are you so hung up on this movie, Bren?”

“It’s the principle!”

He shakes his head but there’s a little smile on his face. He’s so handsome. His hair has dried from his shower, his curls a little more flat than they usually are since he probably didn’t add any product to it. I want to run my fingers through it, but I resolve myself to playing with his leg hair instead. Close enough, I suppose.

“You’re so weird.”

“When you’re my age, you stop caring about what people think. There’s no fucks left to give.”

“It’s not fair that you’re so immature and yet so wise. It’s like the weirdest form of whiplash.” Andras passes the popcorn bowl over, letting me finish what’s in there. “It makes me wonder something.”

“What’s that?”

“How the hell are you single?”

I adjust my glasses on my face, looking at the TV again. A young woman is getting eaten and the special effects are horrendous. I can literally see the tube leading out of her shirt where all the fake blood is coming from. Jesus.

Shaking my head, I look back at Andras. “It’s not that I’ve never dated before, because I have. No one ever stuck. I just haven’t found my person yet, you know?”

As a shifter, I’ve always known that if someone I was dating didn’t feel quite right, I knew it wasn’t meant to be. I was always taught that I’d know my mate when I found them, I would somehow *feel* that they were different, that we were meant to be. As I look over at Andras, I can feel that truth simmering in the pit of my belly.

I really need to get my shit together and admit to myself that Andras truly might be my mate. My inner phoenix can feel it, feel the draw towards him, but my human brain is telling me to be cautious, to hold myself back. We can keep

being friends, we can keep spending time together, and if Andras ever lets me know he's interested in more, then I'll jump on that chance. The ball needs to stay in his court.

I might have fallen but for some dumbass reason, I need him to fall back before I'll let myself believe it, before I let myself have this.

"That makes sense," Andras murmurs softly. "I've dated in the past too but never really felt the right spark. As an incubus, I've fucked a lot of people. Like a lot," he says with a snicker, his cheeks turning a light pink color. "But I never felt compelled to start anything romantic with those people."

"What's it like?"

"What?"

"Feeding." I'm genuinely curious, not just because I've thought about what it would be like to have Andras feed from *me*.

"I've never been asked that before," he says, his brows wrinkling as he thinks. After a moment he looks at me. "It's intense," he starts. I find myself hanging on to his every word as he speaks. "But at the same time it's like getting anything else you need like breathing air or eating food. It can be clinical, similar to only eating food for their nutritional value. But it can also be mind-blowing, like indulging in a food you only ever have once in a while."

"Do you always equate it to eating?"

"It's very similar," he admits with a smile. "I even feel full after I've fed and empty when I'm hungry. Although my stomach doesn't growl or anything like that, but I can feel it in the pit of my being, begging for another taste. And obviously, it goes without saying that it feels *so fucking good*."

Embers of desire stir within my belly at his last sentence. Does it feel just as good for the one being fed on? Maybe someday, if Andras ever makes a move, I'll be able to experience that.

"Could you starve? Like if you stopped feeding?"

Andras shrugs. “I’ve never heard of an incubus starving. If all else fails, I could feed from myself. It’s far less satisfying but it’s enough to keep me going.”

“That’s really interesting. I love hearing and learning about this sort of stuff, how every single race has some quirk that makes them special.”

“I know what you mean,” Andras says with a wide grin. “Did you know that certain pixies feed off of the surprise a person feels when they’re pranked?”

“I did know that,” I tell him, “there’s another type that feeds off of nightmares. Like they can suck a nightmare from a kid without the kid having to experience it and then they’re sated for a while. I think that’s fucking brilliant.” I run my fingers over Andras’ ankle, feeling all the little bones that make it up. “I’m not sure if I believe in a higher power but the idea of someone being made to take children’s nightmares away makes me think that if there is, they’re *good*, you know?”

Andras hums, nodding his head. “I’ve never thought about that before. I like the way your brain works.”

It’s an offhand comment but for some reason it leaves me feeling seen in the best way. My stomach is warm and the smile on my face feels near permanent. “Thanks,” I murmur, looking away so I’m not caught staring.

“What about you? Do you have any fun quirks?”

My heart picks up speed. I don’t talk about it very often but on my very first life cycle, I’d met someone. I was infatuated with him but my inner phoenix never connected with him and when I’d gone through my regeneration, I’d lost all my memories of him. He was offended, said some pretty cruel things, and left before I could regain my memories. Looking back, I can see why my inner shifter didn’t like him, but I was young and dumb.

I know it was a *him* problem, but ever since that, I don’t enjoy explaining my phoenix side to people. I don’t hide that I’m a shifter and I’d never lie if someone asked me point

blank, but I simply choose not to share details unless necessary.

Andras feels safe, but that little anxiety is still there, simmering under the surface, wondering if he'd lash out if I ever forgot him.

"The usual shifter stuff," I say with a shrug. "Scent is really important to me, I tend to be possessive as fuck, and I can shift into an animal skin."

"Are you..." Andras cuts himself off, his cheeks heating up. "Sorry, that's probably rude to ask."

"Ask away, I don't mind."

"I guess I'm just curious if you're an alpha, omega, or beta."

"Oh, I don't mind sharing that at all," I say with a grin. "I'm an alpha complete with my very own knot."

Andras snorts. "You sound so proud of that."

"And why shouldn't I be? I've never had a single complaint about my knot, thank you very much."

"Can I ask what your animal skin is? Or is that like super personal?"

"I think that depends on the shifter you ask. Some people share it without a second thought, and some people, like me, like to keep it close to my chest." I squeeze Andras' ankle. "If you can guess it, I'll tell you," I tell him with a grin.

"Is it an animal with four legs?"

"Nope," I say, my stomach fluttering at the prospect of this becoming a game. I adjust my glasses, waiting for Andras' next question.

"Wings?"

"Yes."

"You're a bird?"

"Yes," I say with a grin. That's close enough. He doesn't need to know the exact type and that my particular brand

comes with the added bonus of regeneration, fire nests, and amnesia.

“I can see it,” he says, tilting his head and squinting his eyes at me. “Yeah, you’re totally bird coded.”

“Jesus,” I say, rubbing at my eyes under my glasses. “I’m too old for this. What the fuck does bird coded even mean?”

Andras chuckles and the sound makes me feel drunk. My limbs all slack and relaxed, a giggle of my own threatening the pit of my belly. “It means you have bird-like tendencies. Like when you tilt your head to the side, or that whistle you do when you’re stuck in your head.”

I squint over at him and he starts laughing even harder. “Even that look! I swear I’ve seen an owl look at me like that before!”

“Whatever,” I say with a playful huff. “At least I don’t have a tail.”

Andras’ tail finds its way from behind him and he slaps me with it. “Hey! Just like your knot, I’ve never once gotten a complaint about my tail.”

I stare at him for a moment, wondering if he’s just pulling my leg. The blush on his cheeks tell me everything I need to know and damn it, now I’m thinking about what exactly he can do with that appendage.

“Good to know,” is all I say, making him blush even brighter.

“Is it?” Andras asks, taking his legs from my lap and sitting up. He’s closer now and the heat of his body so close to mine is driving me wild. “Are there more things about me you’d like to know about?”

I lick my lips, watching in fascination as his eyes dart down to my lips. A thrill goes through me. “Yes,” I tell him seriously, my voice coming out breathier than I meant it to be. “Everything, if I’m honest.”

Andras leans even closer. He’s so close that I could kiss him. I won’t, but I absolutely could. If we’re going to kiss, it’s

going to be *Andras* kissing *me*.

He's leaning in impossibly closer and I close my eyes, anticipation making my skin prickle. He's so close I can feel his breath against my lips. I wait. And wait. And just before he's leaning in the final space, there's a loud knock on the door.

"Fuck," Andras hisses out, springing back. My heart hammers against my chest and my inner phoenix is cussing out whoever is at the door in every language we've ever learned. Andras gets off the couch, quickly making his way to the door and I do my best not to feel like he's running away.

Fuck. We were so close to crossing that line I've placed in the sand between us and now I feel like we've taken a step back.

I stand up, suddenly feeling unsure and awkward. Stepping over to the door, I find a beautiful young lady at the door, asking Andras for some milk. It sounds like she was in the middle of baking something when she realized she was all out.

"Hey, man," I murmur, putting my hand on Andras' shoulder. "I'm gonna head home. I hope you have a good rest of your night."

"No, you don't have to go, Bren."

"It's okay. I'm getting really tired anyway. Old men need their sleep," I add on with a grin that seems to put him a bit at ease.

Once I'm in my car on my way home, I realize I left my flannel at Andras' house.

ANDRAS

“Do you think you’ll make it to midnight, old man?”

“An old man like me is usually in bed by 7:30 so I can be up at 5am but today I’ll make an exception,” Bren says with a grin, taking a sip of his champagne. We’re celebrating New Year’s and decided to splurge on some expensive champagne. I’ve been told it’s ‘the good stuff’ but I’m not sure I can really tell a difference.

I lean back against the couch, slumping just a bit so I can subtly lean against Bren’s side. “Hey,” I whisper so only he can hear. He hums, letting me know he’s listening. “I know we tease you about being old, but does that ever bother you? Are we being assholes?”

Bren chuckles and the sound makes my chest warm. We’ve been hanging out a lot lately despite whatever happened a couple weeks ago.

I’m almost sure that we were about to kiss. We were practically nose to nose and Bren’s eyes had closed and I swear to gods that his lips were puckered up and ready for me to slide in. He was waiting for *me* to make the move.

My neighbor is a really nice lady but that night I was close to cursing her entire bloodline.

“You’re not assholes,” Bren whispers back, nudging me with his elbow. “I mean, Damien is, but when it comes to my age? I don’t give a shit. It doesn’t bother me even a little bit.”

“Cool,” I say, feeling better about our teasing now, knowing we’re not accidentally being hurtful.

Mia, the woman who works with Raphael at the animal shelter, flops down beside me, tucking her legs under herself. Damien and Raphael are sitting together on the floor while Gadreel is sat on Nick’s lap on the chair. Levi is somewhere around here as well, looking fabulous as ever in the most adorable overalls I’ve ever seen. It’s kinda weird that the demonic monarch of our area has somehow become one of our best friends but then again, with this group I really shouldn’t be surprised.

Levi steps into the room with a fresh glass in their hands. “Sorry, needed a top off,” they say with a shy grin. They sit down on the floor close to Raphael, setting their glass down.

“We were waiting for you, no worries,” Damien says, grabbing one of the cats that followed Levi into the room, placing them on his lap. I think this one is named Blue? Maybe? I can only really remember which one is Mister because he’s so fucking grouchy, the other three’s names kinda mix up in my head.

“Ringin’ in the new year with the best game ever created,” Nick says with a wide grin.

“Twister?”

“Aren’t you too old for that game?” Damien asks, raising his brow. Bren just huffs, rolling his eyes.

“Never have I ever,” Nick explains, “one of us starts saying something we’ve never done and everyone who *has* done that thing, has to drink.”

“I’m about to get very drunk, very fast,” Levi murmurs, letting out a groan.

Raphael chuckles. “If you get too drunk you can always sleep in our extra bedroom.”

“Hey!” I say with a pout, “I thought you were saving that room for me.”

“We can always share,” Levi says seriously, making us all chuckle.

“Don’t worry, I can give you a ride home,” Bren says, placing his hand on my thigh and giving it a gentle squeeze. “I doubt I’ll be getting drunk unless you all get incredibly creative.”

Damien holds up his glass. “I’ll go first. Never have I ever lived alone.”

I narrow my eyes at my brother. “Asshole,” I murmur, taking a drink. It’s been weird getting used to living alone but so far it’s going well. The house is a bit too big for just me and I know that I’ll have to downsize soon, but for now, it’s working. Everyone else besides Damien and Gadreel take a drink.

Gadreel goes next. “Never have I ever gotten a piercing.”

“That’s not fair,” Nick murmurs, taking a drink. Levi and Bren also take a drink.

“Wait, what do you have pierced? You’re not wearing earrings!” I say, looking between Bren and Damien.

Nick jabs Gadreel in the ribs making Gadreel blush brightly. “It’s my nipples,” Nick says, rolling his eyes. “I have my nipples pierced.”

Raphael was taking a sip of his drink and he snorts into it, some of it coming out of his nose. He looks over at Bren, coughing awkwardly. “If you tell me your dick is pierced I don’t think I’ll survive.”

Bren starts chuckling, shaking his head. “It’s actually my taint.” Raphael starts coughing even harder, his face slowly turning so bright I swear it’s going to turn purple. Damien slaps his back, glaring at Bren. “I’m sorry, please don’t choke! I was kidding! I used to have snake bites in my lip.”

I turn to look at Bren fully, trying to see if those telltale signs of snake bites are still left in his lip. He grins at me. “I’m a shifter so you won’t find any scars but trust me, I used to walk around with snake bites during my emo phase.”

“You had an emo phase?”

“Doesn’t every artist? I went full guyliner, black skinny jeans, and even had a bright pink fohawk.”

“Holy shit,” Damien murmurs, “it sounds like you used to be hot.”

“Used to be?”

I nudge Bren. “It’s okay, I think you’re hot without the piercings and hair dye.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel my cheeks heating up. Raphael gives me a knowing look and I glare at him, daring him to actually say something.

“Good to know,” Bren says softly and I can hear the grin in his voice.

Thankfully, Mia jumps into the game. “Never have I ever had a one night stand.”

All the incubi in the room groan as we drink. Bren and Nick also take a drink. It surprises me that Levi doesn’t drink. Although, they seem like the type of person to keep to themselves despite their bright sense of style. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of them going on many dates or anything like that. Maybe we should have Raphael do a little matchmaking for our beloved demonic monarch. They work so hard and deserve to have someone by their side.

Bren clears his throat, smirking as he says, “never have I ever been tied up during sex.”

Raphael and Gadreel both blush bright red as they take a drink. I turn towards Bren. “Really? Never?”

His eyes are bright with mischief as he tells me, “I prefer to be the one doing the tying.”

Oh gods, I cannot get a fucking boner right now! Not in front of my brothers! Think unsexy thoughts. Dirty socks. Pigeon poop. Taking my car for a car wash. Okay, I think I’m good.

The look that Bren gives me tells me he knows exactly what his words are doing to me. Fuck. Why can’t we just admit to each other that there’s something between us? Why

can't I saddle up next to him and actually lean against his side the way I want to?

Shit, I think this drink might have been stronger than I realized if I'm having thoughts like this.

We continue like this, going around and around until all of our truths make no sense and we can't stop giggling with each revealing truth. "Never have I ever," I say, hiccupping before going on, "never ever have I put my tail inside someone else."

"Do I have to drink if I don't have a tail?"

"Yes," I declare, nodding my head so hard that my head swims. "Cause it didn't go inside someone else therefore you gotta drink."

I take a drink of my drink, tipping it back and drinking the last of it. Damien starts laughing his ass off. "You can't drink from your own truth!"

"Why not? My tail has been in most of my past partners! It's one of my favorite things to do!"

"Then why did you say you've never done it?"

"Uhh," I stare at Levi for a long moment, trying to figure out why that's not the rules. I eventually shrug. "Isn't that how the game works? You drink when you've done the thing?"

"How drunk *are* you?"

I snort. For some reason that question is making me giggle. I lean against Bren and he wraps his arm around my back, making me feel warm and fuzzy all over. "Am not at all."

"Sure you're not," Bren says and I swear his voice sounds fond. "I'm surprised you can't hold your liquor better."

"In his defense, I got the strongest I could find so that our lovely incubi could actually get drunk," Raphael says sheepishly. I look over at my brothers, realizing they're just as drunk as me while their partners look fine.

"This game was rigged from the start," I say with a giant pout. "How was I supposed to win?"

“Don’t worry, I won by learning some really interesting things about you.”

I stare at Bren for a long moment before finally smiling. “I accept this.”

“Gods, you’re adorable.”

“Ugh, you’re all so cute and I feel so single,” Levi says, crossing their arms over their chest. “I really need to get myself a mate.”

Nick perks up. “Are you still talking to your family about your arrangement?”

“Yes. It’s already in the process. My family was incredibly happy to finally get the chance and it’s only a matter of time before it happens.”

Nick claps his hand and Gadreel gets a sappy grin on his face. “That’s amazing to hear! I can’t wait until you meet them and start bringing them along to these gatherings. You know we’re all going to interrogate the shit out of them.”

Levi gets a soft look on their face. “I wouldn’t imagine anything different.”

I let out a jaw cracking yawn, tucking myself even tighter against Bren’s side. Why wasn’t I doing this earlier? He smells so nice and he’s so comfy to snuggle against.

Raphael flips on the TV so we can start the official countdown to the New Year. I wrap my arm around Bren’s middle as we wait. It doesn’t take long before the announcers are telling everyone to get ready.

“Ten. Nine. Eight.”

I sit up straighter, a small smile on my face as I watch all my friends and family counting down. There’s not another bunch of people I’d rather be spending this night with.

“Four. Three. Two.”

I look over at Bren, wishing I could kiss him. I want to kiss him so badly. But I hold myself back. I refuse to have our first

kiss in front of my brothers, even if I'm feeling emboldened by the alcohol.

“One!”

Mia and Levi share air kisses while my brothers are busy smooching their mates. I grin as Bren leans over, kissing the side of my head obnoxiously. I'm warm all over.

“Happy New Year!”

Once Raphael is done smooching Damien, he looks over at Bren “Are you still okay to drive, Bren? It looks like *someone* is ready to pass out.” Raphael gives me a pointed look and I just grin back. “Don't forget you're opening the shop on Wednesday.”

“That gives me tomorrow to sleep in. I'll be fine!”

“Yeah, I'm good,” Bren says, squeezing my shoulder tight and pushing me away from him in order to stand up. I give him an annoyed whine at being moved but follow behind him without any sass.

After telling everyone goodbye, I get into Bren's car, leaning my face against the cool window as he drives. My head is still light and buzzing from the alcohol, I feel lethargic, making all my limbs feel heavier than they really are.

When we pull up to my house, I turn and look towards Bren. “Can I have a goodnight kiss?”

Oh my gods. Did I really just ask that? Did I really just ask Bren for a kiss? This alcohol is either making me incredibly brave or incredibly stupid.

Bren's face shifts to surprise before his eyes turn a shade sad. He shakes his head. “Not while you're drunk.” He reaches over and touches my cheek softly. I lean against his hand, desperate to feel his touch. “If you remember this tomorrow, ask me again when you're sober, okay?”

“I'll remember,” I promise, nodding my head.

“Go inside, drink some water, and go to bed. I'll text you in the morning to check in.”

I let out a deep sigh before I get out of Bren's car and make my way to my house. Stepping inside, I really fucking hope that I'll remember this tomorrow.

BREN

ALL THE WAY HOME, my heart is hammering against my chest. I squeeze the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles turn white. Andras asked me to kiss him. He wanted a kiss!

My cheeks hurt from how wide I'm smiling. I've been craving this since the moment I've met him and I'm finally admitting it to myself. I have strong and deep feelings for him, but I've been holding myself back, wanting to get the green flag from Andras that he felt the same way before I did anything. I wanted our feelings to be real and sturdy rather than lead by what my inner phoenix wanted.

A tiny voice wonders if this is only happening because he was drunk, but the bigger part of me knows that his walls are down from the alcohol, showing off his true feelings.

I feel giddy with emotions. I feel like I could hike the highest mountain despite the age of my current body. I feel like I could fly to the moon. I feel like I could do anything.

Tonight has been the best night. I got to spend time with some of my favorite people, I got to feel Andras against my side the entire night, and it ended with an almost kiss. The only thing that would have made tonight better is if Andras was sober so I could have actually kissed his lips the way I've been imagining since meeting him.

Gods, I don't think I've felt like this since I was a teenager the time before this life.

I'm on cloud nine.

Which is probably why I don't notice how fast the other car is going as I pass through a stoplight. Everything slows down and my shifter reflexes kick in. It's snowing out and the other car must have hit an ice patch. Or maybe they just weren't paying attention and flew through their red light. Either way, one moment I'm driving home and the next my jeep is spinning.

Thankfully, I was able to accelerate so they only hit the tail end of my vehicle. Unfortunately, that leaves my jeep spinning backwards, colliding with the stoplight pole. The sudden stop leaves me dizzy with whiplash. Everything is too fast, too loud. Then suddenly everything has stopped.

Pain. So much pain.

I blink blurrily, trying to gain some sort of bearings.

I'm not sure how much time passes. I know without a doubt that things are not okay. My head aches, my vision is blurred, and I can't feel my legs which I know is not a good sign.

"Fuck," I just barely get out, doing my best to stay conscious. Someone is talking to me and I can't seem to talk back, my lips not working the way I want them to. Finally, I'm able to get out, "phoenix. Need my nest."

They seem to know what to do. As they get me out of the mangled skeleton of my car, I hear them talking about finding my nest before I pass out.

FIRE. Scorching heat. Nothingness. Flames. Burning. Ashes. Regeneration.

I have no idea how much time has passed. I blink my eyes open, finding myself in my nest.

I feel *good*.

I tilt my head back and forth, shaking out my wings. I open my beak, a little noise leaving me. I wiggle my toes and dig my talons into my nest. As good as this feels, I want to be in

my other skin. Reaching into myself, I let my feathers fall away until I have two legs in front of me.

I slowly sit up, running my fingers through my hair and coughing when a puff of ash sprinkles over my face. Fuck, I think I got some in my mouth. Ick.

Shaking my head, I get the majority of the ash out of my hair before slowly sitting up fully. I stretch my arms over my head, getting all the kinks out. I wiggle my fingers and then my toes, just to make sure they're all there and working correctly.

My body feels solid and real. The fundamentals come back to me slowly. I know how to walk, how to talk, how to use all my limbs. I know my name is Bren. The basics are all unlocked like starting a brand new video game, an interface giving an overview of how the game works.

Closing my eyes, I feel inside of myself. I'm a shifter. A phoenix. I instantly feel less alone as I go through the journey of rediscovery. I also have a bond. I'm imprinted with another person.

I open my eyes, looking around the room. Whoever my imprint partner is, they aren't here. I close my eyes, listening. There's no one else in the house with me. Do they know I regenerated? Fuck, I wish I knew what the hell happened.

Everything before my regeneration is a blur, like trying to look at something through a fog screen. I can tell it was something traumatic. I didn't choose to regenerate, it was brought on based on something happening. That makes everything even scratchier.

I stand up, bending over and touching my toes before standing up straight and reaching for the sky. I bounce on my tiptoes a few times, just feeling my new body, feeling how spry it feels. I take a deep breath, smelling a scent that brings comfort to my chest. That must be my imprint partner. They were here not long ago. That puts me at ease.

Moving away from my nest, I find a note for me and a bottle of water. It's still cold, meaning my imprint partner must

have just stepped out recently.

Bren,

Welcome back to the land of the living! Try not to scare me like that again, asshole. If you're reading this, that means you woke up while I've stepped out. I'm just getting groceries and will be back really soon. I've left your binder in the living room for you to flip through. TAKE IT EASY! I know you want to go from zero to sixty but you've just regenerated after an accident and need time to reset. Have a shower, have some water, eat some food, and relax until I get back.

Your imprinted,

Leo

I toss the note back down before picking up the bottle of water. I chug it, just now realizing how fucking parched I am. I guess burning my old self away will do that to a guy. Once the bottle is completely gone, I make my way out of this room, wandering my house. I quickly find the bathroom. Glancing up at the mirror, I stare in fascination.

My hair is dark, my eyes are a chocolate brown color, and I have facial hair. If I had to guess, I'd say my body is early twenties. I see a pair of glasses on the counter that I clearly don't need and I don't know if they belong to a partner or if they were mine.

Do I have a partner?

I search within myself again, poking at my inner phoenix. There's a phantom warmth within myself and I smile at my reflection. I can't be positive but I'm pretty sure that yes, I have a partner. There's someone out there that's my mate, just waiting for me to finish my regeneration.

I can't keep them waiting.

My movements are quick and efficient as I get myself clean in the shower, watching as the gray ashes slide down the drain. I whistle as I go, excitement filling my stomach. I'm going to find my mate and surprise them with my new look. I wonder if I should be nervous, because I'm not. Not even a little. I'm too excited to surprise them to feel nervous!

After toweling off, I step through my house until I find my bedroom. I take a deep breath, getting familiar with my natural scent. Apparently I smell like smoke. Not gross smoke, but that deep, musky scent right after blowing out a favorite candle. Feels a bit stereotypical of a phoenix but I can get behind it.

I open my closet, finding a pair of jeans and a black Henley. I push up the sleeves over my forearms and throw on a belt. Why the fuck are there so many suspenders in my closet? Am I the type of guy to wear suspenders?

There are boxes at the back of my closet and I toss open the top, finding a stack of sketchbooks. Oh. Okay. I'm an artist. That's not something I remember yet, but I'm sure the draw of pen on paper will come back soon.

Finding a bag near my bed, I open it up and find my latest sketchbook. Holy shit, apparently I'm a *good* artist. At least I assume these are mine based on the little 'Bren' signature at the corner of them. There's page after page of sketches and abstract art. My heart skips a beat and I find myself smiling as I look at this art.

My fingers trace one page I keep coming back to. There's gorgeous green eyes staring back at me. My chest is warm, brimming with emotions that I don't quite understand or fully grasp but my inner shifter is sure of one thing; this is my mate. It's weird having that certainty despite not remembering them.

"Fuck, my mate is hot," I whisper to myself, finding the same muse over and over and over. My fingers slide over a particular page, a flower crown sat atop of unruly curls. The drive to find this person is overwhelming.

I need my phone. Surely I'd have their contact information on there. Hope blooms in my chest as I search for my phone. As soon as that hope came, it leaves as I find my phone completely destroyed.

What the fuck even happened to me?

Outside my bedroom, I wander some more, finding pictures on my walls. The person sitting next to his friends is

old. Why the hell did I wait so long to regenerate? Was I trying to experience what it was like to be an average grandpa? I can't imagine not regenerating the moment I find my first gray hair.

It's probably dumb to be wandering around after skipping my usual binder ritual, but I'm embracing the young and dumb that comes with being reborn. Why learn the obvious things I need to know from a binder when I can experience them firsthand with fresh eyes? Or in my case, a fresh memory.

I find my wallet on the coffee table near the front door. Opening it up, I find my ID, my debit card, some cash, and a business card. The Devil's Sweet Tooth. Huh, I'm not sure why but that name makes my chest warm. Interesting. The address seems to be inside a bigger building. That should be easy enough to find.

It's not much of a lead but it's better than nothing.

Plus, I'm *bored*. If Leo didn't want me to go out and explore, he should have been here, or locked the door. It's not my fault he left me all the supplies I need to be a flight risk.

Heh. Flight. Cause I'm a phoenix. Good one.

Part of me thinks about shifting into my phoenix form and heading through the neighborhood that way, but the bigger part of me realizes it would be difficult to make my way into a candy shop in nothing but my feathers. Better to head over another way.

After grabbing my keys and wallet, I head outside. My house is really nice, something I've spent a lot of time on. Apparently, I was doing really well for myself in my last life. Go me!

The garage door is already open when I step outside and I peer in, smiling to myself when my eyes spot a bike. That'll be perfect for what I need and a great way to see how well this body regenerated. I know my imprinted wanted me to take it easy but my skin is crawling at the thought of being stuck inside another second. I need to get out and *live*.

Sure, there's some snow on the ground, but thankfully the sidewalks seem to be shoveled well enough to make this work. I'm a phoenix so the cold feels good against my hot skin. It would be safer just to walk but like I said, embracing the young and dumb.

I make my way towards the direction of town. The only reason I know I'm going the right way is because there's more traffic this way and appears to be more businesses. I guess the town I've made my home in is a busy place, bustling with people. I think I like it.

"Hey," I call out, pumping the brakes on my bike and coming to a halt. "Do you mind giving me some directions? I'm looking for a place called The Devil's Sweet Tooth?"

A pretty fae woman gives me a friendly smile from the folds of her scarf. "Yeah, I've been there before. You wanna keep going the way you're going until you hit a roundabout, then you're gonna head left. When you hit the theater, turn right and you should see the mall. That shop is inside."

"Awesome. Thanks for your help!"

I follow the woman's instructions, pedaling as fast as my legs will carry me. My hair must be a wild mess from the wind but I don't care. I can't seem to wipe the smile from my face. I spread my arms, balancing the big with just my legs, letting the wind breeze across my face and my body. I feel like I'm flying.

I'm barely winded by the time I pull around the corner and find the mall. I park my bike at the bike rack, hoping like hell that no one gets the smart idea to steal my bike while I'm inside. Heading in, I'm assaulted with scents and noises.

Fuck, everything is overwhelming. People, shifters, the acidic smell of magic, food, sweat, elation, nerves. There's too much all at once and I'm not used to honing my senses yet. I take a moment to cover my nose, doing my best to block everything out. Once I'm in control, I continue forward, looking from store to store for the candy shop.

A grin spreads across my face when I see it. I just barely keep myself from full on running into the shop, needing to show a speck of self-control.

Stepping inside, I find a worker stocking shelves. As subtly as I can, I breathe him in, disappointment flooding my chest when I realize this isn't my mate. But there's something about him that makes me feel safe. Hmm, interesting. Maybe I know this guy?

"Hey," he says, finally noticing my presence. "Welcome in! Have you been here before?"

I look around at the shop. There's shelves and shelves of candy. One wall is completely made out of serve yourself candy bowls with an assortment of candies. This place is awesome.

"I don't know for sure but I'm leaning towards yes," I say, knowing that doesn't make any fucking sense but not caring. "You guys got Nerds here?"

The guy grins and there's something about it that's familiar, that makes me wanna keep that grin on his face. "Well, my brother is working at the register today," he says with a chuckle and I'm struck with *something*.

I've heard that before. I swear I have. I can't remember but somehow the memory is there, tickling the back of my head. It's disorientating, to get the phantom feeling of a memory without being able to grasp it.

My eyes dart to the very back of the store where the register is and everything else fades away. My heart picks up speed, slamming against my ribs.

Like a love sick puppy, I start making my way towards him, my legs seeming to have a mind of their own. My chest *aches* with my need to be near him. He's tall and strong, reaching for the top shelf to pull something down. He's got curly dark hair and two adorable horns sticking out. I can see why I drew him so often, what a perfect muse.

A perfect muse. A handsome demon. Without a doubt, this is my mate.

My mate finally turns around and my breath stutters in my chest like a romance novel cliché. Oh my gods. He's *beautiful*. He's got pretty green eyes, strong cheekbones, plump lips, and the most perfect nose. Wait, something else catches my eye and my grin widens even further when I realize he's got a tail.

I know this man. I can feel it in my chest. I can feel it in my very bones. This is my mate. The frustrating phantom feeling of memories bumps against my brain but I'm unable to latch onto anything tangible. Not yet. But I have no doubt they'll come back quickly. How could I forget such a lovely mate for so long?

My certainty becomes even more solidified when I see the shirt he's wearing. That's my flannel. I know it is because I saw the same flannel but in a different color in my closet earlier and there's the faintest hint of smoke.

My inner phoenix is happy at the sight, seeing our mate in our clothes.

His green eyes meet mine and he puts on an easy smile. "Hey, welcome in," he says, like he's talking to any other customer. He must not recognize me yet.

Instead of easing him into this new version of myself, I do the dumb thing. No risk, no reward. In for a dollar, in for a pound. Or something like that, I don't fucking know.

Walking up to the counter, I reach out and grab my mate by the collar of his shirt—of *my* shirt, tugging him close and kissing his lips. Jesus fucking Christ, his lips feel so good against my own. Sparks lance through me, leaving me feeling warm and tingly all over.

My mate stumbles back, his cheeks bright red and his eyes wide. Fuck, he's so pretty and I'm already so fucking gone on him.

"What the fuck was that?"

I grin from ear to ear. "Don't be upset, babe. I'm just trying to properly greet my mate.

"*What?!?*"

ANDRAS

MY LIPS ARE STILL TINGLING from the unexpected kiss. My heart is jumping into my throat, my tail twitching behind myself in irritation.

“What the fuck, man? You can’t just come in here and kiss my brother,” Damien says, stepping over to the guy at the counter, making him take a step back. The guy raises his hands in surrender but that shit-eating grin is still present. What sorta person kisses a random stranger and still looks so sure of himself? And why the fuck am I weirdly into it?

“Like I said, I’m just trying to greet my mate. No harm done,” he says easily, looking over at me again.

I tilt my head to the side. “Your mate?”

The guy rolls his eyes. “Yes. Your mate,” he says slowly, like he’s explaining something incredibly obvious to a child. Instead of getting offended, I do my best to calm myself down and really look at this guy.

There’s an air to this man that makes me feel like I should recognize him. His brown eyes are aching familiar. His nose, his facial structure, but especially his eyes.

“You look familiar,” I say slowly, looking between him and Damien. As much as this guy seems familiar, I’m also flabbergasted that he had the audacity to kiss me. What the fuck was that?

“Holy shit,” Damien says, his eyes widening, “you look just like my best friend! Are we sure Bren didn’t have a love

child out there somewhere?”

“Wait, *you’re* my best friend? I’m best friends with my mate’s twin? That’s so fucking cool.”

“Why do you keep calling me your mate? Why did you say *your* best friend?”

The guy finally turns serious. He steps over to me again, slowly reaching out and taking my hands in his own. I let him, shivering as his warm hands envelop mine. He brings my hands to his mouth, kissing the back of my hand gently. “You are my mate. I’m sorry I went about this in the funny way, but this must be incredibly confusing for you and it’s rude of me to make light of that.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. As much as I try not to, I find myself hanging on this man’s every word.

“Baby? It’s me. I’m Bren.”

My brain goes completely white. Static plays in my ears. I stare, unable to do anything else.

What. The. Fuck?

My eyes trail over this man in front of me claiming to be Bren. His smile. The eyes. The clothes. Oh gods. Is this really Bren?

“Fuck,” I get out, my voice cracking on the single word.

Bren’s eyes soften, nodding slowly. “Yeah. It’s me. You can sense it, can’t you?”

He’s right. Somehow I can feel that his words are true. Everything else fades away until it’s just me and Bren, holding hands, staring at each other. That is, until my brother breaks the moment.

“What the hell, Bren? Why do you look like this? We literally saw you two days ago!”

Bren lets out a long sigh, turning towards my brother. He keeps my hands in one of his, not wanting to let go of me. I don’t mind, I need to feel him just as much as he needs to feel me.

“There was an accident. I think. I’m not sure the details are really fucking fuzzy yet,” he explains, “I can’t remember what happened exactly but it must have been bad enough that they put me in my nest to start my next life.”

“What does that mean, Bren?” I ask softly, my brows wrinkled in confusion.

“I’m a phoenix,” Bren tells us. “I think this is my eighth life? I can’t remember right now. I can’t remember much if I’m honest. I woke up this morning and decided the best way to spark my memories is to get out into the world and find my mate.” Bren turns towards me, giving me a grin, “which is why I’m here, handsome.”

I lick my lips, trying to find the words to explain that I’m unfortunately not his mate, but my brother jumps in before I can. He reaches over and hugs Bren tight. “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

Bren lets go of my hand, hugging my brother back. “I can tell we’re really close. I can feel it in my chest and my inner shifter is really comfortable here in this space.”

“Because we’re besties,” Damien says, his voice thick with emotion. “Do you have someone you should call? I remember you had this really close friend named Leo.”

“Do you have Leo’s number by chance?” Bren asks with a wince. “I may or may not have left my house without him knowing. He’s probably at my place freaking out that I’ve flown the coop.”

Damien takes out his phone, scrolling through his contacts. Bren must be able to feel me staring at the side of his face because he turns towards me again. I know I should look away but I can’t find the strength to do it, instead my eyes glance over his face, just taking him in. Bren doesn’t seem to mind, letting me look my fill.

“It must be jarring,” he says with a soft smile. He came in here so full of himself, but now all I see is my soft Bren. Okay, not *mine*. Well, according to him he’s mine. Oh gods, I’m so fucking confused right now. “You were probably used to

grandpa Bren and now here I am, looking hotter than ever. I admire your restraint in keeping our clothes on instead of ravaging me the moment you realized who I was.”

A noise escapes my throat without my permission, my cheeks heating. This man is going to be the death of me but gods, what a way to go.

Damien clears his throat. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” Bren says, taking the phone. He puts it to his ear, stepping away for a moment to talk with Leo.

Now that we’re semi-alone, Damien turns towards me, his eyes narrowed. “What the fuck, Andras! You never told me that you two were finally together! I thought you loved me!”

I rub the back of my neck. I’m overcome with *shame*. I should be honest. The longer I let Bren think I’m his mate, the more betrayed he’ll be when he realizes the truth. Didn’t he say his memory would come back? I have until then to straighten this all out.

“So here’s the thing,” I say under my breath, making sure only my brother can hear. “We’re, you know, *not*.”

“Not what?”

“Together.”

Damien blinks slowly, trying to get caught up. Today has been a whirlwind of emotion and I feel like I can’t quite get my footing. “What? But he just said—”

“I know,” I say, cutting him off. “I think that’s just his shifter instincts or something? Telling him that we’re together? Oh gods,” I murmur, rubbing at my eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Not to be that guy but are you *sure* you’re not already together? Because it kinda seems like you are. You’re even wearing one of his shirts!”

I look down at myself, blushing hotly. “He left it at my house. It was fair game!”

“That’s what I mean. You two act like you’re together already. It’s obvious you both have feelings. Maybe this is the universe’s way of finally pushing you together. Like officially, instead of whatever the hell you were doing before.”

“That doesn’t feel fair to Bren,” I say, my stomach flipping every which way. One second I’m delighted by Bren’s attention and the next I’m feeling sick, feeling like I’m tricking him into something he knows nothing about.

“It feels a little unfair that he never told us about this either,” Damien says with a wince. “Not that he *had* to tell us, but you know what I mean. I think you should take him home and talk to him about this.”

“Oh yeah, hey Bren, just so you know you’re in love with me but not really. That’ll go over great!”

Damien’s eyes soften. “Don’t be an idiot,” he says, reaching out and squeezing my shoulder. “He’s gone on you. And you’re gone on him too. Tell him how you feel and explain the situation. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“I don’t like that you’ve become all wise and shit now that you’re mated.”

My brother smiles wide, puffing out his chest. I roll my eyes. Bren walks back over, the phone still pressed against his ear. He winks at me and my stomach flutters again.

“Sorry,” he whispers, pointing at the phone, “Leo is giving me an earful. He said he forgot how I get when I first wake up. Can one of you give me a ride home so this guy will stop yelling at me?”

I nod my head. “Yeah, absolutely.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bren says into the phone. “My mate will give me a ride home, no worries, Leo.” There’s a pause. “Yes, my mate. That’s why I ran away, I had to come find him and surprise him with this new look!”

I just barely keep myself from wincing. Gods, this is going to be a disaster.

“I’ll see you soon, Leo! Bye!”

Bren finally hangs up and hands the phone over to Damien. “Sorry about that. Imprint partner and all that jazz,” he says, rolling his eyes. “He’s worried about me but you’d think after going through this so many times he’d know he can’t contain all of this. People deserve to see me in all my glory!”

“Oh wow,” Damien breathes, looking Bren up and down. “You’re feisty now. I like it.”

“What do you mean *now*? I think I’m offended.”

Damien chuckles. “Don’t be, we’re always teasing each other. It’s kind of our love language.”

“What about you, babe?” Bren asks, turning towards me with heat in his eyes. “Do you like being teased? Because I won’t lie, I’m already coming up with an idea or two for when we’re back at my place.”

“Jesus Christ,” I hiss out, rubbing at my face. My brother on the other hand starts laughing his ass off at my expense. Asshole.

“I think you two should get out of here. I wouldn’t want to stand in the way of young love and all that.”

“I hate you,” I tell him, shoving him as I pass him.

“You’ve got this, Andras. Just talk to him,” he whispers to me as I go.

Bren slides his way over until he’s at my side. As we make our way out of the mall, he grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together. He gives me a soft squeeze and I’m completely at his mercy, practically melting into incubus goo. As much as I know I need to talk to him about the truth, a tiny part of me wants to savor this. I want to relish the feeling of his hand in mine, savor the feeling of having Bren as my mate the way I’ve longed for.

Gods, this is messy.

“Shit.” I look over to find Bren frowning. “I’ll actually meet you back at my place, babe. I have to ride my bike home.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Bren touches my cheek, smiling brightly. “So worried about me. You’re adorable. Trust me, I bet I’ll beat you there.”

“Bren,” I say, trying to stop him but he’s already running outside to where I assume his bike is. I quickly make my way to my car. After taking a steadying breath that does nothing to calm my racing heart, I pull out of the mall parking garage and start heading to Bren’s house.

He was right. Bren beat me to his house. He’s standing there with his arms over his chest, smiling at me as I put my car into park. Without waiting for me to get out, Bren gets into the passenger seat.

My eyes widen. He’s so sweaty, the front of his shirt clinging to his toned chest. Fuck, I’ve always been attracted to Bren, but now his body is even more toned, even more muscular. He’s so hot!

Green wisps dance at the corner of my vision and I’m filled with embarrassment. I shouldn’t be getting turned on in a situation like this! A moment later, red, fiery wisps are joining mine. I meet Bren’s eyes and my heart stutters. He’s eyeing me like I’m the most delicious chocolate cake and he’s ready to devour me whole.

“On my way here,” Bren says, his voice deep and quiet as he speaks. “I realized I didn’t even know your name. Please tell me your name so I know what I’ll be screaming when we’re finally alone in my room.”

I lick my lips, trying to get my brain back online. It’s hard to focus when he’s so close, smelling so fucking good, his red wisps of sexual energy mixing with my own in the air around us. “Andras.”

“*Andras.*” A shiver goes through me at the way he’s saying my name, his voice dripping with lust and want. Bren leans towards me, his eyes darting down to my lips. It’s obvious what he wants. With the last shred of self-control I possess, I lean away from him.

“Bren, wait.”

“What is it, baby? What’s wrong? Whatever it is, I’ll make it okay.”

My chest clenches almost painfully. He has no idea how his words affect me. He has no idea that I want this with every fucking fiber of my being but can’t have it. It wouldn’t be right. It wouldn’t be fair. He doesn’t remember anything and I will *not* be taking advantage of that.

“We can’t do this,” I say softly, wincing when Bren’s brows wrinkle in confusion. “We can’t do this until you get your memories back,” I clarify.

“You want to wait until I remember you?”

“Yes.” I reach out and take Bren’s hand in my own. “I just don’t want you to get your memories back and regret any of this.”

“I couldn’t,” he says right away. Bringing my hands up to his mouth, he kisses my knuckles. “I know the way I feel about you, Andras. I can feel it right here,” he explains, touching the center of his chest. “Do you not feel the same about me?”

“It’s not that, Bren. We’ve just... We umm... Well.” I let out a long breath. “I think we both have incredibly deep feelings for each other but we’ve never actually, you know, *acted* on those feelings.”

Bren’s eyes widen before he’s slumping in his seat. “What? Are you sure?”

I nod my head, a tiny smile playing at my lips. “I think I would have known if we were together.”

“I don’t know, I might have just re-met you but already I can tell that you seem like the type of guy to not realize when someone’s flirting with you.”

I shove Bren’s shoulder, making him chuckle. “Hey! Don’t be a dick!”

“I’m not, I’m not. I’m genuinely disappointed. You *feel* like my mate.” He rubs at his face. “I also feel kind of

embarrassed. That must have been weird, to have me calling you babe and shit.”

“Hey,” I murmur, reaching over and placing my hand on his thigh. “Not weird. It was—” I shake my head, hoping he can’t see the blush of my cheeks. “I liked it, Bren.”

“Are you *sure* I can’t talk you into coming inside and making out with me? Maybe I can talk you into trying just the tip?”

I can’t help but snort, amusement making me giddy. “Jesus, how *old* are you? You should like a horny teenager discovering boobs for the first time.”

“You can’t blame me! Have you *seen* yourself? I’m hard just sitting close to you!”

Before I can call him a horndog affectionately, there’s a knock on the window that makes us both jump. “You asshole!”

Bren rolls down his window, looking sheepishly at the man standing at his window. This must be Leo. “Hey! Leo! My man! How’s it going?”

“Don’t you play dumb with me! I was so worried about you! And then I find out you’re out trying to get your knot wet? What the fuck, man?”

Bren’s body straightens with tension. “Don’t fucking say that, Leo! This is my mate we’re talking about!”

“Your mate?”

Leo looks at me and I raise my hand in the most awkward wave of my life. “Andras? Since when are you guys mated?”

“Uhhh.”

“Fuck, sorry, babe. Wait. Shit. Sorry again. It just feels so right to say,” Bren stutters out, wincing in my direction.

If I thought things were messy before, they feel even messier now.

“Why don’t we go inside and talk this out?” I suggest. Leo and Bren both nod. Before getting out of my car, Bren leans over and kisses my cheek, like a silent apology for everything

going on which is absurd, he has nothing to apologize for and I plan on reminding him that once we sit down and have this talk.

BREN

IT'S SO hard to focus when Andras is here, in my space, wearing my flannel. I can hear my imprinted partner talking but the words all feel like background noise. My stomach is fluttering with the most pleasant butterflies as I stare at my mate, watching as his brow wrinkles in concentration as Leo talks.

“Are you paying attention?”

“Yes,” I say right away, hoping they haven't noticed how my entire attention was on Andras. The deep sigh from Leo tells me I've been caught. “Okay, no. Sorry.” I look over at Leo with a pout. “Have you seen him? Gods, he's beautiful, I can't help it, Leo.”

“Bren, please. You can't just have lovesick puppy eyes and get out of this. Pay attention.”

I groan. “Fine. Sorry.”

Leo rolls his eyes at me and looks back at Andras. “So yeah, being a phoenix is an amazing thing and being able to regenerate over and over is like a super power. Which is my theory as to why we've been nerfed to forget everything for a while.”

“How long does it usually take to get your memories back?”

“It's different every time. In the past, Bren usually gets his back within a week. Two at the very most.”

“Okay,” Andras says slowly, taking all of this in. He’s so brave and strong to deal with all of this. He’s so admirable. I’ve chosen so well in my mate. I know I have heart eyes but I don’t care, too busy watching my mate. “What about the whole *mate* thing?”

Leo shakes his head. “I’ll admit, this one is new.”

“Well duh! In the past I didn’t know Andras!”

“I’m just worried this is like some sort of weird phoenix thing picking the first person you see as your mate,” Andras says, wincing when I get a hurt look on my face. “Sorry.”

“That’s not a real thing,” Leo explains, patting my shoulder to comfort me. “Bren is just listening to his inner shifter. During this time we’re really vulnerable and could very easily be taken advantage of so our shifter instincts are even louder than usual. His inner phoenix is telling him that you’re his mate.” After a moment, Leo adds, “I’ve seen the way you two are with each other, Andras. I don’t think he’s wrong.”

Andras looks away, his cheeks blossoming with color. Fuck, he’s so cute. He blows out a long breath before nodding. “This is just a lot to take in.”

“You can take all the time you need,” I tell him seriously. “This isn’t some spur of the moment thing. I want you. I’ll wait for you. However long you need.”

“Jesus Christ,” Leo blurts out and my eyes widen, forgetting that he’s sitting here with us. “I’ve never heard you talk like this with someone before. This is actually the real deal, isn’t it?”

I nod my head. “It really is.”

Andras clears his throat and my eyes dart over to meet his. He gives me a soft smile. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, because I do, Bren. I just want to wait to start anything officially until your memories come back. Is that okay?”

“Of course, sweetheart. Anything you need.”

There's a long pause between the three of us. Andras is looking at me, his eyes soft. Leo is the one to break the silence. "I think I'm going to head back to my house. I think maybe the two of you have some things to talk through and you don't need me babysitting."

"You don't have to go," Andras says and if I'm not mistaken, there's a bit of nervousness to his voice. Is he nervous to be alone with me? "I don't want to put you out, Leo."

"You're not," he reassures with a soft smile. "You two have a lot to talk about and you don't need me here for that. I'll be back in the morning though, alright?"

Once Leo is gone and the two of us are left alone, there's a stillness in the room. Neither of us move. Neither of us speaks. The silence goes on until I can't take it any longer.

"Do you wanna make out?"

That does exactly what I hoped it would do; break the tension. Andras' shoulders relax and he slumps against the couch, letting out a long breath. He looks over at me, a small smile on his face. "Ask me again in a week," he says with a wink.

"Gods, you're such a tease."

Andras chuckles. "You apparently like that."

"I think it might just be *you* that I like," I say, poking his thigh with my foot. We're at opposite sides of the couch. He feels so far away but I'm genuinely so happy that he's *here*. His scent is sinking into the room and I hope it sticks around even when he leaves.

My chest aches at the thought of him leaving, but that's an issue I'll deal with tomorrow. Right now I want to give Andras my full attention.

"Can I ask you some questions?"

"Of course," Andras says, nodding his head. "Whatever you want to know."

"Do you enjoy working at that candy shop?"

“Very much so. My brothers and I actually own it.”

“Oh wow, really? That’s amazing, Andras.” My foot leans against Andras’ side and when he doesn’t push me away, I keep it there, just wanting to touch him. “When you say brothers?”

“I have two,” he answers with a smile. “Damien and Gadreel. You met Damien and the two of you are actually super close. You have a knack for pulling pranks on him.”

My stomach warms as I listen to Andras speak, his voice incredibly soothing. “What’s been your favorite prank I’ve pulled?”

Andras’ face lights up, his green eyes somehow even brighter. Fuck, he’s so beautiful. My fingers itch for a paper and pencil so I can sketch his features. That’s new. “You turned him blue.”

I can’t help but smile, picturing the man I met earlier today being completely blue. An uncomfortable tickle plays at the back of my head at the image, something is there but just frustratingly out of reach. I want to poke at the memory, scratch away the surface until something tangible is there. No matter how much I probe, I come up with nothing.

“That must have been a sight,” I say softly, laying my head against the back of the couch facing Andras. He pulls out his phone, pulling up a picture for me. I can’t help but chuckle, fondness filling my chest.

It’s strange. To feel an emotion such as fondness for someone I have no memory of, but it’s still there, warming me up from the inside. It’s comforting. It’s familiar in the oddest way.

“He stayed like that for like three days. It was pretty awesome.” It seems I’m not the only one feeling fondness tonight. The tilt of Andras’ voice is soft and when his eyes dart over to me, they’re filled with emotion.

“I have another question but this one will probably be a tad uncomfortable,” I say sheepishly, watching as Andras sighs dramatically. I can tell he’s only messing with me, gesturing

for me to go on and ask. “Why haven’t we gotten together yet? Please tell me we’ve at least kissed before.”

Andras’ cheeks redden as he shrugs. “I mean technically we’ve kissed. But only the one time earlier today.” He runs his fingers through his curly hair, shaking his head. “I don’t know, Bren. I think we were just always waiting for the other person to make the first move.”

“Got it. The moment I get my memories back, I’ll make the first move.”

“That sounds good. If you still want to make a move after all of this, that is.”

“I will.” I smile over at him and he smiles back. “I do.”

“I hope you’re right, Bren,” he says softly.

“What do I do for a job?”

“Man, this is so trippy,” Andras murmurs, tipping his head against the back of the couch, mirroring my posture. “You own an art studio. Kinda? It’s like this super fun place where people can come paint ceramics. You have the fancy thingie that bakes the pots and all that shit. I think you teach some art classes as well.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” I say, looking down at my fingers. “I have this itch to pick up something and put it to paper. Especially when I look at you. I think I might be an artist.”

“You are,” he says right away, his eyes darting away. “I’ve seen a few of your pieces and they’re incredible, Bren.”

The praise washes over me, making me grin. My inner shifter is content, basking in our mate’s presence. I could spend all day and all night right here on this couch listening to Andras talk. But for him to continue talking, I need to keep asking him questions and that’s exactly what I do.

I learn about Andras’ father, I hear about the hell realm he’s originally from, I hear about Damien and Raphael meeting and getting together. Next I hear about Gadreel and how he got together with Nick. I listen to Andras talk about

himself until he's blinking slowly, his stories coming slower and slower.

“Do you want to watch a movie or something? You can stay the night if you want.”

Andras looks over at the clock, his eyes widening when he realizes it's two in the morning. “Yeah, I think I'll stay,” he says, letting out a huge yawn.

I turn a movie on the TV, not really caring what it is knowing we'll both be out like a light before it even really starts. I stand up and head to my room, grabbing pillows and a comforter so we can be comfortable out on the couch.

When I get back to the living room, I can't help but smile. Andras is already snoring. His features are so soft like this. I carefully brush one of his curls off of his forehead before placing my comforter over him. He snuggles into it. I'm about to turn around and head to my room when a hand reaches out, snagging my wrist.

“Wait,” he murmurs, his eyes blinking up at me. “Stay with me?”

“Are you sure?” He nods and I carefully join him on the couch. Thankfully, the cushions are just wide enough for the two of us to sleep side by side. One wrong move and I'll be on the floor but this is worth the risk.

Andras' body is pressed up against mine from chest down to knee. We fit together perfectly and I smile against the back of his shoulder. When I fall asleep, I feel more at peace than I have in a long time. Well, as far as I remember anyway.

ANDRAS

THE FIRST THING I realize as I slowly wake up is how fucking *hot* I am. The second is the weight against my chest.

I blink slowly, trying to figure out where the hell I am. A dark head of hair is in my eyes and the most adorable snuffled snore hits my ears. That's when it hits me. I'm at Bren's house.

My body goes tense for a moment, realizing the position I'm in but I quickly relax into it, wanting to enjoy the closeness while Bren sleeps on, not wanting to wake him. Bren is laying across my chest. My tail is wrapped around his back, keeping him from being able to roll off of me onto the floor.

I feel like I could stay like this forever.

It's hard to process everything that's happened. I've learned so much information that it threatens to overwhelm my brain. Bren is a phoenix, he was in an accident, he lost all his memories, he thinks I'm his mate, and on top of all that, he suddenly looks like he's younger than me.

I close my eyes, letting out a long breath. If I think about things too hard my brain will start hurting. How can this young and impulsive Bren somehow be the same Bren I've fallen for? Instead, I focus on the feel of him against me. He fits so perfectly. I want him here all the time. It's no secret that I want him, but with his memories gone, it doesn't feel right to start anything yet. The longing in my chest threatens to choke me, but I need to hold myself back for just a little while longer.

Bren begins to stir. I run my fingers through his hair before pulling my hand away, remembering myself. Apparently holding myself back is harder now that I know that Bren wants to be with me. Well, this young version of him does at least. Fuck, why is this so confusing?

Bren hums before letting out a huge yawn. He tucks his arms around me as best as he can, giving me a tight squeeze. “Good morning,” he murmurs, his voice thick from just waking up.

“Morning, Bren.”

“I could get used to this,” he says softly, carefully adjusting so he can sit up, finding a spot between my legs. He looks up at me with an achingly soft smile.

“What?”

“Waking up with you in the morning.”

Jesus Christ. How the hell am I supposed to stop myself from kissing him when he says shit like this? The next few days, waiting for him to get his memories back is going to be torture. Maybe I should just give him some space so I’m not tempted to reach over and caress his cheek or lean in and kiss him softly.

My face must show some of the emotions raging inside of me because Bren squeezes my thigh gently. “Sorry, I’ll try to keep my sappy comments to a minimum until my memories are back.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. I’m just worried about you. I don’t want you doing anything you’ll regret.”

“You’re looking out for my feelings. I understand, Andras. I’d wait another entire lifetime for you.”

Without thinking, I reach out and cup Bren’s cheek. He leans into my touch, more like a house cat than a phoenix. I run the pad of my thumb under his eyes, realizing just how pretty they are now that we’re so close and he’s not wearing glasses. Bren turns his face, kissing my wrist gently before pulling away and standing up. I quickly pull my tail out of the way so he can go.

My hand clenches the same way my heart does. Shaking off the feeling, I stand as well, following Bren into the kitchen.

Bren quickly gets to work starting up his coffee machine and digging through his fridge for some breakfast. “I could make French toast or we could have cereal. Do you have a preference?”

“French toast please.”

“You got it.”

I hoist myself onto the counter, watching as Bren gets to work making us breakfast. Thankfully, it seems like the everyday stuff comes back to Bren quite quickly. I’m still feeling a bit lethargic from just waking up, that’s my only excuse for staring at his hands the way I do.

Bren’s fingers are long and thin, moving deftly as he whisks the eggs and dips the bread into them. They’re artist’s hands and fuck, my mind conjures images of my body being his canvas. I bite my bottom lip as he moves the bread from the bowl into the pan. He ducks his fingers into the sink, letting water wash over them to clean the egg away. When his eyes dart over to me, I look away, doing my best to get control of my thoughts again.

There are a few green wisps floating around me and I blush, thankful that Bren can’t see them. My only excuse for my wayward thoughts is that I’m still waking up. Coffee! Coffee would help.

Like he can read my mind, Bren steps over to me. “Can you hand me two coffee cups? They’re in that cabinet next to you.” I turn as best as I can, pulling two coffee mugs out and handing them over to Bren. “Thank you, baby. Shit. Sorry. I meant Andras.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him with a warm chuckle.

Bren places the mugs down on the counter. I watch as he gets himself some ice from the freezer, putting that into one of the mugs. He finds some coffee in the fridge he must have made a few days ago, pouring himself an iced coffee before starting on my mug.

My heart stutters and my breath catches. He pours some creamer into my mug before finding some brown sugar in one of his cabinets, putting a spoonful with the creamer and stirring it up. Then adding the hot coffee on top.

That's how I always prefer my coffee.

Does he— is it too much to hope that he *remembers*?

Bren quickly flips the French toast over before walking over and passing me my coffee. I take it between my two hands, bringing it to my mouth and taking a sip. I close my eyes. It's perfect.

"Bren," I whisper, opening my eyes and finding him still standing before me. I set my coffee down beside my hip. "*Bren.*"

"Why do you look like you're freaking out?"

I pull him forward until he's standing between my thighs, my tail instinctively going around him. I stare down into his brown eyes. "You made my coffee."

Bren's brows are wrinkled in confusion. "Well yeah. That's what good hosts do."

"You made it exactly the way I like it."

"Did I?" Bren looks away from me to the cup of coffee. He stares for a long moment before his face lights up with a giant smile. "I did! I remembered the way you like your coffee!"

I'm overwhelmed with joy. "Oh my gods! You remembered!" I reach forward, grabbing Bren's face between my hands. Without thinking, I lean down and kiss him.

I kissed him.

My chest feels like it might actually burst from how happy I feel. It's something so small but it's *something*.

Bren stares up at me, blinking slowly. He looks dazed. It somehow amplifies my joy even more.

"Sorry," I whisper, unable to stop smiling.

“Never *ever* apologize for kissing me. You’re always welcome to. Feel free to kiss me again, even. Just a free pass for you and you alone to kiss me.”

“Good to know,” I say back, grinning from ear to ear. “I shouldn’t be getting so excited about one memory but it’s so incredible, Bren. I’m so happy.”

“This is always how it starts. Little things popping up,” he says, squeezing my knee before stepping back and taking the French toast off the pan before it burns. I was so excited about my coffee that I forgot there was food on the stove. Oops!

The rest of the morning feels like a dream. Like I’m floating on cloud nine. I finally let myself believe that I get to have this, that I get to have Bren.

Bren serves our French toast with some powdered sugar, syrup, and a side of whipped cream. He gives me a soft smile, telling me he thinks he remembers that I have a sweet tooth and I can’t help myself, leaning over and kissing him again. If I’m not careful, I’m going to condition him to expect kisses with every memory that resurfaces.

We’re having breakfast when Leo shows back up. He wanders into the kitchen, pouring himself a cup of coffee before sitting down at the table with us.

“I’m glad to see you two are still okay,” he says, giving me a soft smile.

“Thanks. By the way, I had a question for you guys. How come he remembers *you*?”

“We’re imprint partners. Have been since our first life,” Bren says, like somehow that explains everything to someone who isn’t a phoenix.

Leo rolls his eyes, giving me some more details. “A phoenix can choose someone to imprint on. It’s kinda like a baby duck imprinting on their mother. It’s someone who’s safe and you immediately know will take care of you. A lot of times, a phoenix will imprint on their mate but neither of us have. Sorry, *had* that until now so it was easier to just imprint on each other.”

“Oh,” I say slowly, taking this in. “So if you imprint on your mate, you’ll remember them straight away?”

“Maybe not immediately, but very quickly. And even if you don’t remember them, you feel *safe* around them.” Bren hums, reaching under the table and squeezing my thigh knowingly. “Pretty cool, right?”

“But what about you, Leo? If Bren imprints on m— a mate,” I say, stumbling over my words and blushing. Thankfully, neither of them call me out on the slip up. “Would you need to find a new imprint partner?”

“Nope. As long as Bren will still have me, I’ll keep my imprint on him.”

Bren finishes the food he’s chewing before clearing his throat. “You know you’ll have me for as long as you need me, Leo.”

“So,” Leo says, looking between us. “Have any memories surfaced?”

“He remembered how I take my coffee,” I say proudly, taking a sip of said coffee. It’s delicious and warms me all over.

The three of us spend the rest of the morning chatting and catching up. Leo tells Bren about his job, his hobbies, his daily routines, and anything else he can think to add. Bren spends most of the morning making jokes. If I didn’t know him any better, I’d think he wasn’t taking this seriously, but I *do* know him. This is his way of coping, to make jokes and make us laugh instead of making us worried when he can’t remember something.

“I should probably head home,” I say, holding up my phone and flashing the time. “I need a shower and to make sure my brothers are okay. They covered my shift today and I don’t want to take advantage of them.”

“I’m sure they’re more than happy to cover for you,” Bren says, running his hand over my forearm. He’s been touching me all day and I can’t find it in myself to complain. It makes me happy, having these innocent, soft touches from him.

“Yeah, they’re okay, I guess.”

“I still need to meet Gadreel again.”

“Maybe we can all hang out this weekend or something.”

Bren looks up at me for a moment before letting out a sigh. “I don’t want you to leave yet but I get that you probably want some time alone to process all of this.”

“It seemed like you and Leo still have a lot to go through. I don’t want to be a distraction.”

“You’re not,” Bren says right away. “Can I give you a hug? Sorry, that was random. I just really want to hug you.”

I chuckle warmly, my stomach flipping with delight. “Yeah, you can hug me. You can have a free pass to hug me whenever you want actually.”

Bren wraps his arms around me, holding me close. I run my nose through his hair, breathing in his scent. If I’m honest, I don’t want to leave either and honestly, why should I go home? Bren has a shower and clothes here. He doesn’t seem to be sick of me yet.

“I’ll stay,” I tell him.

“Really?”

“Yeah. But I really do want a shower and a change of clothes.”

“Of course. Anything for you, sweetheart.”

Damn him and his casual use of pet names. My heart is melting a little more every time he does it. If Bren remembers everything and doesn’t reciprocate my feelings, I think it might literally destroy me. The sooner those memories come back, the sooner I’ll know one way or another for sure. I just have to be patient a little while longer.

BREN

I SWALLOW THICKLY, heat licking just under my skin. Usually, I'm a big fan of the heat. My body runs hotter than most and it goes without saying that me and fire have a unique and special relationship. This heat is different though.

“What’s got you squirming in your seat?”

I look over at Leo, a frown on my face. “Don’t know. Feel kinda weird. Hopped up and wired?”

Leo reaches over, touching my forehead. “You’re a little warm. Nothing too unusual though.” Changing the topic, like he’s trying to get my mind off my discomfort, Leo says, “so. You and Andras, huh? That seems to be going really well.”

My mood instantly perks up at the mention of Andras. “He’s wonderful, isn’t he?”

“You’re so far gone on him, holy shit. I’ve *never* seen you like this.”

“Really?”

“I’ve known you since our first life, Bren. The way you look at him even though you don’t even remember him? That man is your mate.”

I can’t help but grin, overwhelmed with a giddy sensation that spreads through my entire body starting at the center of my chest. My imprinted believes Andras is my mate, that means more than words could ever say. I listen carefully, hearing the water still running in my shower, letting me know Andras is still cleaning up. My mind flashes with pale skin,

dripping with water, a towel around his waist. I close my eyes, rubbing at them as I try to hold onto the memory. Fuck, was that real or just a fantasy? The brain tickling sensation tells me it was a real memory.

“Did you just remember something?”

I look up at Leo, my hand itching to *create*. Andras mentioned that I own an art studio. I wonder if I’ve ever tried my hand at clay sculpture because right now the only thing I want to do is slide my hands across clay until I remake Andras’ stomach. The ridges of his abs, the v of his pelvis, the slight swell of his chest. My entire body heats again, that simmering discomfort sitting just under my skin. “I’m not really sure. I don’t know why I would have seen Andras in a towel but if I have then yeah, that was most definitely a memory.”

“Huh. Your memories of him are coming back quicker than I would expect. That’s great news, Bren.”

I run my fingers through my hair, wishing I could be in the shower with Andras. My inner shifter is sad he’s washing away his natural scent but that also means there’s a chance I can cover him in *my* scent once he’s out. Oh my gods, the idea of covering him in my scent drives me a bit wild and it takes everything in me to control myself and not start rutting against the flannel he left behind on the couch. What’s getting into me?

“I feel like my skin is too tight,” I say softly, trying to get the words to describe this feeling. “I feel like something’s not quite right but I don’t know what will fix it. Does this usually happen?”

Leo reaches over and takes my hand in his own, bringing my wrist to his nose. He breathes me in, his eyes widening. “Ah,” he says, giving me my hand back. “Maybe I should head out. I think you’ve got to talk to Andras about some stuff.”

“What stuff? What’s going on?”

“I think you’re going into rut. Which honestly just furthers my point of him being your mate, but also this is gonna be really awkward because he doesn’t want to fuck until your memories are back.”

“Oh fuck,” I hiss out, covering my face with my hands. Now that Leo has spelled it out I can feel that his words are true. I’m going into rut. My body wants me to mate and fuck and claim my mate. Jesus Christ, this is the worst possible time for my body to do this!

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Just *talk* to him. He’ll either want to help you through it or he’ll go back home until it’s over. No biggie.”

The idea of Andras *leaving* fills me with dread. I want him here in my space. I want his body pressed against mine until I can’t tell which smell is his and which is mine because they’re mixed together so thoroughly. I want to leave a beautiful bite across his shoulder, showing everyone that he’s mine.

“No biggie,” I say back, my voice breaking. “I’ll text you later, okay?”

“Sounds good. Let me know if you need groceries or anything and I’ll play delivery boy.”

“Thanks, Leo.”

I lay back on the couch, letting out a sigh that seems to come from the very depths of my chest. I stare up at the ceiling, wishing it somehow had the answers to all my problems. My body is craving something, but right now it’s just a simmer of what’s to come. My head is still clear and for that I’m incredibly thankful.

By the time Andras joins me in the living room, my mind is made up. I’ll tell him to leave. I would never want to do something that makes him uncomfortable or push him for more before he’s ready. I would never forgive myself.

“Hey,” he breathes out, looking down at me with wet hair and a bright smile. “Where’s Leo?”

“He had to go,” I say gently. “Andras, you should probably go too.”

That smile fades away, leaving a hurt look in its place. “What? You want me to leave? I thought you decided you want me to stay.”

He’s wearing my clothes and my inner phoenix is chirping happily, whispering how he’s ours, how he needs to stay. Fuck, I feel all twisted up inside. “I want you to stay—”

Before I can keep going, Andras cuts me off, “then I’m staying.” He gets onto the couch with me, laying his body against mine. Without thinking, I wrap my arms around him, holding him tight. I swallow thickly, my entire body going lax under the weight of my mate. This feels good. This feels right. What was I so worried about before?

I let out a long sigh. “Thank you.”

“What’s wrong?”

Oh right. That’s why I was worried. My rut. Ugh!

“Weirdly enough, the fact that you’re laying on me is helping me feel a lot better.”

“Really?”

“Mhmm. Your scent and your weight and your presence is calming me down.”

“I’m like your own personal weighted blanket,” he says with a smile. “Should I be worried, Bren?”

I wrap my arms around Andras’ back, holding onto him. My heart aches. I want him to be here but I need him to understand what’s happening. He can make his own choice once he’s got all the information in front of him.

“No,” I start with, wanting to reassure him. “I’m okay. Everything that’s happening is perfectly natural.”

“Okay,” he says slowly.

“I’m in a younger body now. There are things that happen to a shifter when they’re this age around someone who their inner shifter is sure is their mate.”

Andras readjusts so he can look down at me, his eyes wide. “Shit, Bren, are you going into heat?”

I can't help but chuckle. "No, I'm not an omega. I'm an alpha."

"Okay, right, I totally knew that. So not heat. That's good. Umm, is that good? I don't actually know."

I run my fingers through his hair, my chest warming as he leans into my touch. "I'm going into rut."

"I'm not gonna lie, I'm not sure I know what that means, Bren."

"It means my body is acting on shifter instinct. I really, really want to keep you here but I know we agreed to take things slow and I don't think I'll be able to hold myself back if you stay here," I confess softly. "I really, really want to touch you all over and mark you with my scent and—" I pause, licking my lips, watching as color blooms on Andras' cheeks. "I really want to fuck you."

Andras closes his eyes, sucking in a sharp breath.

"I'm sorry this is happening before all of my memories are back."

"It's not your fault, Bren," he says, touching my cheek and running his thumb just under my eye. My brain tickles again, like a memory is just out of reach and I do my best to relax into it, let it come back to me naturally. I open my eyes again, staring up at Andras.

"Oh my gods, I told you about that time I was impaled by my roommate?"

"You remember that?"

"Yeah! It was in a room full of people and I told you all about that time I was using a dildo in my bedroom and my roommate opened the door, saw me naked, and slammed the door! Jesus Christ, I need to learn that some things can just die with me instead of being repeated," I say with a low groan that makes Andras start to laugh. Oh. *That's* why I shared, isn't it. Because I knew it would entertain Andras.

It still boggles my brain that this man somehow doubted I had feelings for him. It seems glaringly obvious.

“You’re remembering more and more,” Andras says before he dips his head and kisses my cheek.

Oh.

Oh my gods.

As much as I want Andras close, I pull away so I can look into his eyes. “I know what your cum smells like,” I blurt out.

“*What?*”

“I was at your house right after you jerked off in the shower,” I tell him, my words getting quicker as the memories come back to me, my head starting to ache from them hitting all at once. “Why the fuck did you think I wouldn’t notice? Were you *trying* to tease me?”

Andras blushes right red. He sits up further and pulls me alone with him so we’re sitting awkwardly, chest to chest. “I didn’t do it on purpose! I was trying to take the edge off so that when we hung out I wouldn’t be a horny mess!”

“Instead, I was a horny mess! I wanted you so fucking badly but I was holding myself back!”

“Why?”

I shake my head, trying to clear my head. “Something about not knowing if you wanted me back or not,” I say, my eyes darting up to meet his. “I was waiting for a sign. I didn’t want to be the creep who hit on his best friend’s brother!”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Andras says. He runs his fingers through his hair before a look of determination crosses his eyes. “Here’s your fucking sign,” he murmurs before taking my face between his hands and kisses me.

This kiss is different. This kiss says everything we’ve been holding back. This is someone kissing *their mate*.

Andras’ lips open and I dart my tongue into his mouth, moaning when his taste overwhelms my taste buds. My body goes from zero to sixty so fast it makes my head spine. Andras’ hands cup my face, keeping me from running away, but there’s honestly no way in hell that I’m going anywhere.

I close my eyes, a vision of meeting Andras for the first time hitting me square in the chest. The moment I laid a hand on him, I knew. I might have played coy, I might have waited for him to give me a sign that he was okay with my affections, but from that moment I somehow knew we would end up here. The realization steals my breath. When I woke up to this new body, I knew I had a mate out there waiting for me and this just further proves that, it cements our bond.

Andras' mouth moves away from mouth but doesn't go far. His mouth continues to work, pressing kisses into the skin of my throat. I tilt my head back, giving him more room as shivers run down my body.

"Full disclosure," I say, my breath coming out in harsh pants. I lick my lips, trying to find the right words but it's hard with the way Andras' is kissing me. "I don't have all my memories back. Just enough to know I've wanted you from the moment we met at that bar."

"That's enough," Andras says before diving back into sucking a mark into my throat. My inner phoenix is stunned into silence at the idea of Andras marking us. Fuck, we love it and we crave to do the same to him. "That's enough for me, Bren. Want you. I'm so fucking tired of holding back."

"Me too, sweetheart. Even if I wasn't in rut I'd want to fuck you senseless right now."

"I'm not opposed," Andras says with a grin. He pulls himself from the couch, pulling me behind him towards my bedroom.

Oh.

Oh my gods.

Okay, we're actually fucking doing this. I actually get to have him. I'm downright giddy as I follow my mate.

ANDRAS

OH. My. Fucking. Gods.

My heart is hammering in my chest so loudly I can *feel* it in my ears. My stomach is turning flips and my face might be permanently stuck in this grin.

Bren wants me.

Bren *remembers* me and still wants me just as much as he did when he met me for the second time. I feel so giddy I could do a backflip but instead I save my energy for the cardio we're about to perform together.

I feel like I'm starving and I plan on gorging myself on Bren. "I wonder if I'll be able to taste your rut," I murmur, thinking out loud.

Bren makes a strangled noise behind me. "Fuck, Andras. I don't even know if that was meant to be hot but it *was*."

I smile to myself as we make it to Bren's bedroom. Now that we're here, I pause. I'm certain I want to do this, but is Bren? Thankfully, he seems to see my hesitation and is quick to reassure me.

"If you want to stop, we can stop, Andras. But if you actually want this? Gods, I would be the luckiest man alive to have you. I can feel it right in the center of my chest that you're my mate."

Bren takes my face in his hands and I feel *treasured*. This must be how a dragon looks at his hoard. I've never felt so

seen, so cared for than I do in this moment. My worries all melt away, leaving nothing but certainty.

“Hey, Bren?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m in love with you.” I didn’t plan to tell him right now, but the words come tumbling out anyway. I’ve been holding them close to my chest for awhile now, wanting to hide my feelings but with everything that’s happened, I need to get them out before they consume me from the inside out.

Bren’s eyes close, like he’s breathing in my words, too blissed out to do anything but savor it. He gets on his tiptoes so our foreheads can touch. When he finally breathes, it’s a shaky inhale of breath. With my face still in his hands, he kisses me, achingly gentle.

“Wow,” he breathes out, finally opening his eyes. “That’s the most beautiful sentence I’ve ever heard.” I can hear the grin in his voice. “I love you, too.”

My knees threaten to buckle. There’s no more holding back. There’s no more second guessing or wondering or silently pining from a distance. We’re both diving in with both feet, plunging into this new chapter *together*.

I make a breathy little noise, something between awe and stunned gasp before I’m kissing Bren again. I plunge my tongue into his mouth, overwhelmed with desire and the need to solidify our claim on each other. Bren is right there with me, kissing me back. His hands go to my pants, undoing them and I get with the program, doing the same for him.

As desperate as our kisses are, our movements are even more so. We fumble with each other’s clothes until we’re both giggling breathlessly, needing to step away so we can tug our clothes off ourselves.

Bren’s naked body steals my breath. He’s perfect. He’s lean and toned, his stomach having a dark patch of hair that leads from his belly button down to his cock. And his cock. Holy shit. His dick is literally perfect. It’s long and pink with defined veins on the underside, making it as unique as a

snowflake. My mouth waters, wanting to feel it against my tongue.

My eyes dart away as Bren's hand wraps around his dick. I blush, being caught staring but Bren only smiles, giving me a knowing look. Bren moves over to the bed, crawling onto it and beckoning me to join him. The speed that I leap onto the bed after him leaves us both giggling again.

I quickly get between Bren's thighs, leaning down to kiss his lips. "Hi," I whisper as I hover over him.

"Hi," he whispers back, his fingers dancing across my spine. "I can't believe we're really doing this. It's weird because I somehow feel like I've wanted this for so long while also feeling like it's fresh and new."

"I've wanted this long enough for the both of us," I say with a grin.

"Once we get started, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop, Andras. You still have time to leave before we start anything, no hard feelings."

"Fuck that, Bren. I'm all in. I'm jumping in with both feet. I'm loving you with abandonment. *Let me,*" I say, finishing my sentence by rolling my hips, our cocks brushing against each other between us and making us both stutter out a moan.

We trade heated kisses as my hips start a steady rhythm, pushing against each other, pleasure zinging through us as our erections brush between our bellies.

I'm so lost to my lust that I almost forget the question I've been dying to ask. Pulling away, I suck in a sharp breath, doing my best to calm myself down. "Bren," I gasp out, staring down at his lust blown brown eyes. "I remember you telling me that you have a knot, right?"

"Yeah, but don't worry, I don't *have* to knot you. I can pull out before it fills up all the way."

"Like hell," I say right away, anticipation making me giddy. "I want it."

"What? Really?"

“Fuck yeah. I want you stretching me open wider than I’ve ever been before. It’s going to be so fucking good, Bren. Please?”

“Jesus. Yeah, okay. We can do that. That’s very okay. Fuck, Andras, how are you so fucking perfect?”

“Born this way,” I say with a smirk. “Where’s your lube?”

Bren carefully shifts under me so he can flip over and reach under his bed. He hands me the lube. “Do you want me to finger you open?”

“Yes, please.”

Bren groans, his eyes closing in bliss for a moment before they’re snapping open, pinning me in place. “Do you have any idea how fucking good you sound saying please like that?”

“Oh, fuck. I always imagined you’d be a bit bossy in bed. Was I right?”

“Guess you’re about to find out, aren’t you, sweetheart?” A groan leaves my lips, my cock *aching* to be touched where it hangs heavy between my thighs. “Flip over onto your hands and knees for me.”

I quickly comply, burying my face against Bren’s pillow which smells strongly of him. I turn my head, watching as gorgeous wisps of sexual energy float around the room, building up from our frothing and foreplay. I want them so fucking badly but I wait, wanting to save them for when Bren is ready to knot me.

Bren’s hands caress my ass before he’s pulling my cheeks apart. My tail smacks the back of my thigh in surprise and a moment later, something wet and hot is touching my hole. I cry out, overwhelmed as I realize it’s Bren’s *tongue* on my hole.

“Oh my gods. Fuck. Jesus! Holy shit!”

Bren pulls back and chuckles. “Actually it’s Bren.”

“If you continue to tease me I might literally leave.”

“We wouldn’t want that,” he says softly before diving back in, licking over my hole over and over until it’s soft and pliant. I spread my legs as far as I can, arching my back and burying my face against his pillow. If it was anyone else, I’d almost be embarrassed by how needy and wanton I’m acting, but it’s *Bren*. I can show him this side of myself because I know he’ll love it, just as much as he loves the confident, sure of myself side. That certainty makes this pleasure even better. It’s sweeter, softer around the edges. It’s not just a transaction of mutual pleasure, it’s an act of love.

“Bren. Fuck. Please, don’t stop.”

Bren’s fingers dig into my asscheeks as he keeps me spread open, his tongue prodding at my hole until he’s sure he can start adding fingers. The lube is cold but quickly warms as he presses into me. I relax as best as I can, sinking into the feeling of being penetrated. Before I know it, Bren has three fingers inside of me, his tongue lavishing the area around his fingers. I’m a sweaty, sputtering mess, begging to finally feel his cock.

“I’m gonna make you come, that way you’re nice and relaxed when I knot you.” Bren doubles his efforts, rimming me like a man starved. Now that I know he wants me to come, I stop holding myself back. I take a deep breath, sucking in just a fraction of the sexual energy in the room, letting myself feed.

“Fuck!” I cry out, the taste of our energy on my tongue making lightning race down my spine. Bren’s fingers work inside of me, stretching me and hitting my sweet spot. My toes curl as pleasure rises up like a crashing wave. When that wave peaks, so do I.

A hand wraps around my cock, squeezing and massaging my orgasm right out of me. My entire body lights up before all of that pleasure is surging to my cock. I cry out as I come across the sheets below me, my ass gripping Bren’s fingers as I throb with pleasure.

“I’ve got you,” he murmurs, pulling his fingers free. Bren taps my hip, urging me to flip over onto my back. I lay there,

already blissed out and lax, just like Bren was hoping for.

Before I can complain about being empty, Bren is sliding into my ass. I close my eyes, savoring the feeling of his hard, hot dick inside of me, filling me up. He stays still, just letting me enjoy this, the aftershocks of my orgasm making me shake.

“Gods, you feel so fucking good, Andras. I can’t wait to lock us together with my knot.”

“Please, Bren. Fucking *move*.”

Thank gods he starts moving, pulling almost all the way out of me before pushing back in, just as smooth. I want him to fuck me hard, but instead, Bren takes his time, slowly fucking me until my cock is coming back to life, filling with blood and hardening all over again. My toes curl at the delicious rise of pleasure, just simmering under my skin. The wisps of sexual energy are growing thicker, gorgeous reds and greens mixing together, reminding me of Christmas time.

Bren is completely in control of the pace and that drives me wild with lust. I always had a feeling he’d torment me deliciously when we finally got here and I’m so fucking glad to be right. This is everything I hoped it would be and yet so much *better*.

My mouth craves something pressing down on my tongue. My cheeks heat as I take Bren’s clean hand, bringing it to my lips. I open up and he quickly gets the idea, pressing two fingers between my lips.

“Fuck, Andras,” he hisses out as I close my lips around the digits, sucking on them gently. I swirl my tongue around the tips of them before sucking again. Yes. This is exactly what I needed.

“Someday I’ll take you from behind while keeping your mouth busy with a dildo attached to the bedframe. Would you like that? Feeling like you’re being filled at both ends?”

I whine around Bren’s fingers, my cock twitching where it lays on my stomach. I nod my head vigorously, my eyes wide as I watch Bren smirk down at me. Okay, this the real Bren is so much better than any of my fantasies.

Bren's hips start to pick up speed, fucking into me just a little bit harder. His knot is starting to swell, catching on my rim with every thrust. I tilt my head back, overwhelmed with the sensation of being fucked so thoroughly while also having Bren's long, dexterous fingers in my mouth. It's too much. It's not enough. I don't even know anymore what's up or what's down anymore, too washed away by our lovemaking.

"Are you ready for my knot, sweetheart?"

I nod my head, my eyes wide as I stare up at my mate. Yes, *my mate*. That's never felt more true than right now.

Remembering that Bren is a shifter, I tilt my head to the side, exposing my throat for him. Bren *growls*, the sound radiating between us and making my cock jerk. Fuck, that's so hot. His mouth is there instantly, licking and sucking and biting. I whine, completely lost in pleasure.

"Gonna make you mine," he breathes against my sensitive skin. "Gonna knot you and mark you and bite you. *Mine*." He's growing more frantic, his movements taking on an edge of desperation. He's following his instincts instead of being in control.

I suck in a sharp breath around Bren's fingers, wanting to taste this frantic side of Bren. His energy tastes so fucking good with a hint of bitterness from his rut. "I'm gonna come," I gasp out as Bren pulls his fingers free. "Fuck, Bren. You're gonna make me come."

Bren's hips stutter before he's pushing forward hard, burying himself completely inside of me. His cock expands at the base, stretching me further than I've ever been stretched. A moment later I feel warmth splash my inside as his knot *throbs*. It's so fucking good that it pushes me over the edge as well. I come for the second time, covering my belly with my cum. Bren swipes his hand through my cum, bringing it to his own belly and rubbing it in.

I watch with wide eyes as he scent marks himself with my seed. He's running purely on instinct, letting his rut take him away and I'm happy to be along for the ride.

As pleasure floods us both, I open my mouth, bringing every last wisp into myself, further extending my orgasm and properly feeding. My belly flutters and warmth rushes through all of my extremities until it's pooling hotly at the center of my chest.

At the same time, sharp teeth are digging into my shoulder, piercing me. I cry out as yet another orgasm is forced from me. A connection is formed and tears spring to my eyes without my permission. I can feel him. I can *feel* Bren. Not only is he my mate in name, but he's my mate on a spiritual level, one that's irrefutable even through regeneration, even through lost memories. He is mine and I am his through the good and the bad and the fire.

Bren buries his face against my throat, letting out a choked sob. I wrap my arms around him, holding him tight, overwhelmed just the same as he is.

We stay like that for a long time, just holding each other, his knot snugly locking us together. We're connected, body and soul.

Eventually, Bren pulls himself up, staring down at me with shiny eyes. "Hi," he whispers and we both smile at each other.

"Hi," I say back. "That was—" I shake my head, unable to find the right words for how I'm feeling or how fucking amazing that was. "Yeah. It was just *yeah*. You know?"

"That makes no fucking sense and yet I know exactly what you mean," he says, chuckling. He leans down and kisses both of my eyes, then my nose, then finally my lips. "I'm so fucking in love with you."

"That's really good to hear because I just so happen to kinda sorta be in love with you too."

"Only kinda sorta? I'll have to work on that. Make you fall in love with me even harder."

"Any harder and I'll be stuck with a third leg permanently."

Bren snorts, shaking his head in amusement. He pauses, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them again.

“Remember that time I spent an entire day making memes out of the different pictures of Damien I had on my phone? I have no idea why I was so fixated on that but you never once complained despite getting meme after meme of your brother’s face.”

I smile so wide that my cheeks start to hurt. “Yes, I remember that! It’s one of the many things that made me fall so fucking hard for you. You’re just such a goofball while also knowing when to be serious. You’re so loyal to Damien. You’re so gentle with your art students. You’re creative and funny and smart and you have these errant thoughts that make me sit down and think about how I view the world. You’re everything to me, Bren.”

Bren runs his fingers through my hair, gently touching one of my horns and making me shiver. “I feel the exact same way about you and I’m cursing past Bren for waiting this long to have this talk with you. He was so scared, but I’m not.” Bren kisses my lips gently. “I love you so much and I plan on making sure you know that with every single one of my next lives.”

We spend the rest of the night riding out Bren’s rut, fucking over and over. He makes good on his promise, suction cupping a dildo to the wall and having me impaled at both ends. Bren promises to show me his rope skills someday and I honestly never thought of myself as being submissive but there’s something about Bren taking charge that makes me melt into a gooey pile that wants to be good for him. By the time his rut comes to an end we’re both sore and exhausted. Worth it though because I don’t think I’ve ever felt so sated in my entire life.

BREN

“BABE,” Andras says seriously, his hands on his hips. He’s being incredibly adorable which is *not* helping his case. “I *have* to go. It’s been three days! My brothers are starting to get worried that you’ve kidnapped me.”

“But I have,” I say proudly. Andras rolls his eyes at me. “Plus, what if something happens? What if I fall down and can’t get back up? What then, huh?”

“Oh my gods, you can’t keep using that excuse, Bren. You’re no longer an old man!”

I give him the biggest pout I can muster up which finally makes him crack, the tiniest smile playing at his lips. *Success!* “Can I just come with you?”

“You want to come with me to work?”

“I could just wander around the mall. Or like sit in the backroom at your shop. I don’t know. I just don’t want you to leave yet,” I say honestly. Some people would think now that we’re officially mated, my instincts would calm the fuck down. Those people would be wrong. Now that there’s a mating bite across Andras’ shoulder, I want nothing more than to keep him completely covered in my cum so that people can *smell* me on him. Damn hormones. Maybe older Bren actually knew what he was doing by letting himself grow old. “The mating bond is still really new and my inner phoenix is having a fit at being separated.”

Andras lets out a long sigh before he finally nods. “Yeah, okay. It’ll be bring your mate to work day.”

“Fuck yes! I wanna try all the new candy and hand out free samples,” I say, springing up from the couch and running over to the door to put my shoes on.

“Jesus, I wasn’t expecting you to be so excited.”

“I finally get to remeet Gadreel! The only thing I remember about him is that his mate has pierced nipples!”

Andras covers his face with his hands. “This is going to be an experience. That’s for sure.”

After getting our shoes and coats on, we make our way to Andras’ car. The drive over to the mall isn’t too long and before I know it, we’re heading inside. On our way to the store front, we’re stopped by a security guard.

“Holy shit. I heard you looked young but I didn’t realize you’d look *this* young. You’re like 19 now.”

I stare at the man, realization dawning on me. “Nick! You’re the one with the nipples,” I say, pointing at my own chest and grinning from ear to ear. The face palm from beside me is audible, making me giggle.

Thankfully, Nick just grins. “As far as I know, everyone here has nipples, yes. It’s really good to see you, Bren. We were all really worried about you.” He turns and looks at Andras. Pointing at the white bandage on his throat, he asks, “is everything okay with you?”

“Oh yeah, I’m fine. This is umm, this is my mating mark actually,” he explains, his cheeks reddening. My chest puffs out proudly, my instincts roaring with joy at everyone being able to see that Andras is my mate.

“Oh my gods, congratulations you two! I’m so fucking happy for you both,” Nick says, pulling the two of us into an awkward hug where one of his arms is around each of us. When he pulls back, he’s still grinning. “I have to make my rounds but I’ll make sure to pop my head into the shop later.”

“He’s so nice,” I murmur under my breath.

“He’s really good for Gad. He brings him out of his shell.”

I nod along as we make our way to the shop. Once inside, Damien and Gadreel look up. They're identical with my mate but somehow I'm able to tell them all apart. My chest warms being around these three, being a part of this family even if I can't remember every detail about them yet. I instinctively know this is where I belong.

"Andras! I was sure you were never coming into work again," Damien says, walking around the counter and pulling his brother into a tight hug.

Gadreel follows, walking over to us. "It's really good to see you both. Damien doesn't want to admit it but we were worried about you."

"As you can see, I only bit him once when he asked," I say with a grin.

Damien and Gadreel's eyes dart over to Andras' throat and I watch as my mate gets an embarrassed look on his face. He glares at me before looking at his brothers. "I'm mated."

"*You're what?!*" they both say at the same time.

"Surprise?"

"Does this mean you have your memories back?" Damien asks, almost hopefully.

"I have a lot of them back already, but not all of them. I remember you being blue. And I remember Gadreel getting drunk off wine and accidentally dipping his tail in purple paint when you guys came to a paint party one time."

"Oh my gods, we promised not to talk about that," Gadreel says with an annoyed groan that makes me smile.

"That *can't* be your most embarrassing moment. I refuse to believe that."

"It's not but that doesn't mean I want to relive it."

Damien butts in, looking Andras up and down. "I can't believe you two are mated. When you left here you were so set on letting Bren down easy."

I clear my throat. “Honestly? We were both kinda worried about your reaction. There’s a bit of a taboo feeling that comes with falling in love with your best friend’s brother.”

Damien pinches the bridge of his nose, letting out a long sigh. “Let me get this straight,” he says, his eyes darting between the two of us and despite being the oldest person here by a long shot, he’s making me feel as young as my current meat suit. “You two have been holding back from being together because of *me*?” Andras and I look at each other before nodding. “You’re dumbasses. I love you both and I’m so fucking happy to see the two of you finally together.”

“Thanks, man,” I say, pulling Damien into a tight hug. His approval means more than words can say. At the same time, I really should have had this conversation a long time ago. I plan to make up for lost time. I have many, many lifetimes ahead of me with Andras and these three and I don’t plan on wasting it.

Andras jumps into work, greeting a customer who’s just walked in so I take that as my sign to get comfy behind the register. I take a seat and pull out my sketchbook that I’ve brought along. I page through it, smiling at how many sketches are just Andras.

“Paint me like one of your Demon girls, Jack,” Damien says with a grin as he comes to sit beside me. I roll my eyes at him, flipping open to a clean page.

“I would but I didn’t bring any blue markers with me.”

“Asshole,” he murmurs under his breath. This feels so easy, so *right*. I watch as Nick comes into the shop, stopping to chat with Gadreel. The two of them are adorable together and I can instantly see what Andras means by Nick bringing out the best in Gadreel, making him more confident in himself.

It’s not long before it’s lunch time and instead of us leaving, Raphael shows up with some bags of food. As he steps over to us, his eyes widen. “Holy shit,” he says, looking between me and Andras. “You two finally did it! You bonded! Oh my gods, I’m so fucking happy,” he says, setting down the

bags of food and pulling me into a hug. I drop my sketchbook in the shuffle.

“Thanks,” I squeak out as he hugs me just a tad too tightly.

“I’m sorry. I’m just so happy. I saw your bond the moment you met and I’ve wanted to push you two together since then but I knew it would be better to let you find each other when you were ready. Your soul lines are so bright and beautiful. Congrats you two.”

“Thanks, Raphael,” Andras says with a shy smile. He picks up my sketchbook, seeing the image of his mating bite I was working on. He hands it back, kissing my cheek. “He’s pretty cool, I guess.”

We close down the shop with a little sign at the front gate, letting people know we’re taking a lunch break. Moving into the backroom, we all sit at the table, pulling out burgers and fries and chicken tenders in Andras’ case.

“Did you get sweet and sour sauce?”

Raphael nods, tossing the packages over to Andras. Damien starts tipping his chair back as far as he can without falling backwards. He gives me a look and I roll my eyes, doing the same as him.

“You two are gonna hurt yourselves,” Gadreel murmurs.

“I’ve got this. I’m in this new, young body,” I say proudly - just before I fall backwards with a yelp. I stare up at the bright lights on the ceiling.

My eyes close and my body tenses. Like a memory stick being plugged into a computer, my brain suddenly overwhelms me with memories. It happens all at once, flooding my senses with a hot, white flash. When I open my eyes again, I blink a few times, trying to get my bearings.

“Bren? Are you okay?”

I sheepishly get myself back up off the ground. I sit back down and stare at my friends and family. These people whom I love so dearly, who welcomed me into their circle with open arms. Who love me just as much as I love them.

“I’m good,” I say, overwhelmed with emotions. Andras’ tail slides over to me, wrapping around my leg. “I remember everything,” I tell them, emotions so thick they threaten to choke me. “My memories are back.”

“You still love me, right?”

A wet snort leaves my lips and I turn towards my mate with a wide grin. “I didn’t think I could love you more and yet, here we are,” I tell him seriously, pulling him close so I can steal a quick kiss.

“Ewww! Gross! How dare you kiss *my brother*,” Damien says, trying to tease me but I just give him the finger.

Andras’ tail squeezes my leg and I give him a soft smile. We finish lunch before the triplets are back to work. Raphael and Nick kiss their mates with promises of seeing them after work.

Later that day I pass out free samples and run into Beck and Levi who both exclaim how happy they are to see me doing well and congratulate me on my mating. I let them know that they’ll have to come over for dinner sooner rather than later. I love when our group gets together, we always have so much chaotic fun.

At the end of the night, after cleaning up and closing down the shop, Andras and I say goodbye to his brothers before making our way back to my place. “You know,” I say, looking around at my home, “this place is kind of big for just me. Since we’re mates and all, maybe you’d like to officially move your things over here?”

Andras’ eyes widen before his face morphs into something softer. “I would really like that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Now that I have you, I’m not letting you go, Bren.”

“Good,” I say, kissing his lips until I’m grinning too wide to keep kissing.

EPILOGUE

ANDRAS

I PULL the last sheet over the couch, completing our blanket fort. I crawl inside, grinning over at my mate who's already inside waiting for me. "Happy Valentine's Day," I tell him, leaning over and stealing a kiss.

"Happy Valentine's Day, sweetheart. I got you two presents. One of them is serious and one of them is silly. Which do you want first?"

"Umm, serious," I tell him, excitement making my chest warm.

Bren pulls something from behind his back and hands it over to me. I smile so wide my cheeks hurt. "This is perfect, Bren. Thank you so much!" In my hands in a homemade coffee mug decorated with Bren's handprints so it looks like he's holding the mug. It's beautifully crafted just for me and makes me feel so cherished. Bren's so good at making me feel special.

"Let me give you my gift and then you can present your silly gift."

"Okay," he says, waiting patiently. I had over the little box, watching with nerves as he pulls the paper away. He slides the box open, grinning when he realizes what it is.

"I thought you needed something for behind the register at work."

Bren runs his fingers over the frame I made, his smile only widening. "This is so perfect, sweetheart. Thank you so

much.” He sets the frame down, pulling me into a soft kiss.

I made my own picture frame out of leftover Nerd boxes. There’s a picture of the two of us in the frame and at the bottom there’s a little note that says ‘I’m your nerd’. It’ll fit right in with his other silly little mementos by his register at work.

“Okay, okay,” he says, pulling back and stopping himself from kissing me some more. We both know that once we get started, it’s hard to keep our hands off each other. “So this is the other gift for you.” He hands me a tall gift back covered in paper. I pull the paper away and begin to giggle.

“What the fuck is this?”

“It’s my dick!” Bren declares happily.

“But it’s chocolate. It’s a chocolate dick.”

“Not just any dick. *My* dick. I used a mold and everything.”

“Oh my fucking gods. I cannot believe you’ve done this.”

“It gives a whole different meaning to eat a dick,” he says, so fucking proud of himself. I tackle him onto his back, crawling over him.

“And if I feed you your own dick? What then?”

“Are you *trying* to seduce me? Because you’re doing a hell of a job, babe.”

I roll my eyes and dive down to kiss my ridiculous mate. We make out for a while, content to keep things soft and simmering. Moving onto our sides so we can look at each other in our little blanket fort. We’re in our own little world. It’s perfect.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You just did,” I say, making Bren chuckle. “What’s up?”

“Will you be my imprint partner?”

My stomach flips at the unexpected question. Without a shadow of a doubt, I already know the answer to that. “Of

course, Bren.”

He smiles at me, staring into my eyes. He touches my face and I lean into his touch. He continues to stare, bringing himself closer and closer until our foreheads touch. Then he moves away, nodding to himself. “Done.”

“Wait, what? No. There’s gotta be more than that. You’re fucking with me.”

Bren begins laughing. “What do you mean? What did you expect?”

“I don’t know! But it was more than that. Like a fire ritual or something.”

“It’s already done. You’re my imprinted. You’ll be the safest one to me when I regenerate next time.”

“Oh,” I breathe out. “I love you, Bren.”

He gives me a soft smile. “I love you too, sweetheart.”

“Now it’s my turn for a question.” Bren nods, letting me know he’s ready. “What happens when I’m old and wrinkly?”

“Then I’ll be old and wrinkly too.”

“I mean after that.”

“There is no after that,” he says softly, his features growing serious. “You’re *it* for me, Andras. When the time comes, I’ll make sure that we grow old together. I’ll be there for your end and that will be my end too. Once you’re gone, I won’t regenerate again. You’re the love of my life,” he says, kissing my cheek. “But before then we have so many more lifetimes together. You’ll see me young, you’ll see me old, and you’ll see me at every age in between. Are you up for that?”

“More than you know,” I say, tugging him until he’s on top of me. I lose myself in the feel of his body against mine, his lips pressing into me, his voice telling me how loved and precious I am. He tells me how thankful he is that I’m his mate, but the truth is, I feel like the lucky one. I get to have this when I was so sure it was a fluke.

Bren is my mate and I'll see him through every stage of life that comes at us. I'll love him when he's old, when he's young, and everything in between. I'll be his imprinted and safe person. I'll be whatever he needs me to be because I know that no matter what, this is for the long haul. I might be it for Bren, but the same can be said about him for me. He's mine until the very end and I look forward to all the twists and turns that come our way before then.

THE END



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you first and foremost to all of my readers. Without you all I wouldn't be able to keep writing these stories! Your love for this series has made me so happy and so thankful, y'all are the BEST!

A huge shout out to my best friend, Charlie. I love you so much. Thank you for talking with me through ideas, sharing plot bunnies (despite how often they populate LOL) and just being there for me. Your support and help means so much to me!

Thank you to my alpha reader, Meg. Your insight and excitement while I write helps keep me on track and keep the words flowing!

To my proofreader, Alee, THANK YOU. Your excitement over these two sparked more joy than words can say. You're the best.

Thank you to my Patrons over on Patreon. I love you all so muuuuch! Y'all are always so excited for every story I tease you with. Thank you for the extra support!

Finally, thank you to my PA, Janet! You're amazing and help me focus all my time and energy on making words. Thanks for loving my characters and for everything you do.

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Toby Wise is a stay at home parent who hails from a tiny town in Wisconsin. Contrary to popular Wisconsin stereotypes, he's not a cheese-head who enjoys beer but rather an introvert who spends all his time on the internet, drinking coffee, spending time with his kid, and cooing about his adorable cat, Pikachu.

In April of 2019, A Collection of Strays was born after the world of fanfiction drew him back into his love of writing. Now he's writing all things omegaverse as long as it includes silly moments and found family.

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