

A DEMON POLYAMOROUS ROMANCE



DARKEST
DESIRES

ALESSA HALE

Darkest Desires

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DISCLAIMER

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Chapter One

“**H**ey, Shannon. This is a gimmick thing, right?”

“Hmm?” I lower my eyeliner and glance over at Grace. Of course, she’s already perfectly put together, dark curls tied back and her pressed blouse as immaculate as at the start of the workday. “What, Goëtica?”

My MP3 player is connected to the car’s speakers, blasting a song from the band in question. I know them well. I know them *very* well. After all, they’re the group we’re on our way to see in concert.

Well, I am. Grace is more of a fan of the support band and knows Goëtica only in passing. Mainly through the osmosis of hearing me speak of them. I’m glad to use the drive to introduce her to more of their songs.

I’ve known Grace for quite some time through work, but we’re still on the awkward cusp between close acquaintance and true friend, and the two-hour drive from San Diego to the venue in Anaheim with no buffer was a daunting prospect.

“Yeah, Goëtica,” Grace confirms, amused. “I mean, some of these lyrics...”

I give a small laugh. “Oh, wait until you see them.”

“Mmm... I remember you said something about their aesthetic?”

“I guess you could call it a gimmick,” I agree, returning to my makeup attempts. I’m not used to putting it on. I only ever bother for special

occasions or going out, neither of which are regular occurrences. The eyeliner smudges a bit, but I suppose it adds to the messy, smoky look. “They have a whole backstory and lore around the band. All the songs and music videos are ‘in character,’ I guess you’d call it.”

“As *what*, serial killers?”

“Demons.”

“What!” Grace says, breaking into giggles. “I was kidding.”

I smile at her. “Well, *they’re* not.”

“Damn. I guess that explains why some lyrics are so dark.”

“They are,” I agree. “But they have a poetic sort of savagery to them.”

Grace glances over at me, running her eyes over the outfit I changed into after leaving the lab. “I figured you’d be into that.”

Her tone is teasing, making me smile. Strange to think that this is the first time we’ve met up outside of work, beyond hastily grabbing coffee during breaks. She’s never seen my hair swept over to reveal the undercut sides before since I normally wear it parted in the middle and tied back in a bun at work to look ‘professional.’ The color has always been unnatural, though—dyed silver, with brown roots growing through because I haven’t bothered with the upkeep recently.

She’s never seen my fashion sense before, either. I’ll be the first to admit that I throw together a wardrobe from whatever I find in thrift stores. It’s somewhere between lazy punk and melodramatic goth, depending on how much time I have to get ready.

Because we had to leave straight after work and considering the practicalities of being in a concert crowd for a good number of hours, I’ve opted for something basic and comfortable. Black skirt, fishnets, band shirt. Hardly anything overtly weird or out there, I’d thought. But apparently, I just have a vibe where people can tell I’m some kind of ‘other’ no matter what I wear.

“Pfft. Grace, c’mon.”

“Always the quiet ones, right?”

I laugh. “I have literally worn nothing but black the entire time you’ve known me, and you know my music taste. How did you not at least have some idea?”

“Lies. I’ve seen you in a white dress shirt several times.”

“Monochrome.”

“The red dress occasionally.”

I would have looked Grace dead in the eyes had she not been focusing on the road. “The color of blood,” I joke, dry and deadpan, earning myself a snort from her. I wave a dismissive hand. “Anyway. You like at least some of the same music. You’re not one to talk.”

“Sure, but I’m not *edgy*.”

“What? C’mon, I’m hardly—”

“Your boys are,” she says with a nod to the stereo.

All right. I have to give her that one. “Fine. They are. Unapologetically so, and I love them for it.”

Grace is going to find out firsthand. One of the biggest draws about seeing Goëtica live in concert? They’re in character for those too. Special effects and all.

‘Edgy’ or not, they wield it well. They have such a natural confidence about them. They fit the roles so perfectly that it hardly even seems like an act. It’s not cringy or hard to take seriously, not when they own it the way they do.

In fact, they almost do it too well sometimes. They’re a bit terrifying. Elias and Caelan—the two band members. Or the two characters, I suppose. Caelan is violent, unpredictable, and a little sadistic, with a vicious penchant for blades and blood. Elias is more refined but commands powerful black magic and confidence to match, with a smile that could either break your heart or steal your soul. Likely at the same time.

Yet they’re also the most captivating people I’ve ever seen. There’s an

energy about them that draws me in, utterly hypnotic. Always has been.

Now that Grace has brought it up, and we're so close to seeing them, I can't stop thinking about it. About them, about the whole demon gimmick thing. The concept and how convincingly they play it is a little terrifying but a *thrill* at the same time.

It's the bad boy trope taken to the extreme. That's all.

But damn, they got me good with it.

I flick through their songs, picking out the best to share with Grace. A mix of their most popular releases—the ones which will probably be played at the concert—and my favorites of the lesser-known songs, avoiding some of the less palatable ones. Some of them, especially the accompanying videos, get twisted. A little gory at times. Aesthetically so, a grotesque beauty to them, but it's fucked up. And a hell of a lot hotter than it should be.

Thankfully, there's not too much of the drive left, and I occupy it with singing along. Grace is amused but doesn't seem to mind. Her fingers tap the drum beat against the steering wheel once she gets a feel for the rhythm of the songs.

The venue is one I've been to several times before. The looming white wave of the concert hall rises beyond the walls and line of palm trees surrounding it. Immediately beside it is a dark ocean of tarmac. We're late, having come straight from work and through rush-hour traffic, so the parking lot is already packed.

After parking, we hurry through to the grand archway and see there is no longer a line outside the building.

"It sounds like the opening band is already starting," I say once inside.

Grace nods in agreement. Since we are already late and she's our driver for the night, we decide to pass on drinks and ease our way into the crowd in the main arena.

Searing flashes of colored lights cut like beams through the uproarious crowd. Cramped together amongst the bustle and sweat, we wind our way

closer to the stage and into a decent position to see. I can already feel the adrenaline thrumming through me. It's noise, excitement, and alcohol, the atmosphere heady. I'm not the most familiar with the band playing currently, but their songs have a solid bass, and it thrums through the building like a heartbeat.

I love concerts. Something about them makes me feel alive.

Of course, there's also the anticipation about seeing them. Maybe a little trepidation. Goëtica. Elias and Caelan.

I don't want it to be a disappointment. I've been hyping myself up for it for so long, not meaning to, but still letting excitement get the better of me, and I worry that I've set my expectations too high. How well can they truly replicate the effects from their videos, editing and all, in a live setting? Yet if they don't appear as something convincingly supernatural, I know I'll be let down.

Idiotic expectations, really. Idiotic, all of it. I shouldn't care so much about a band, but I can't help the way I'm drawn to them. Dragged into the stories they tell with helpless fascination. Something about them feels oddly like it... fits.

Forget demons. Sometimes I wonder if they're sirens.

My own thoughts make me snort at their ridiculousness. I'm grateful for the distraction of the music and roar of the crowd. I wish I knew the opening band better and knew their songs well enough to sing along because *that* is one of the parts I love most. There is no self-consciousness at a concert—heaven knows it's too damn loud to hear any single individual singing in the crowd—and the energy is utterly infectious.

And then it's over. A short intermission while the instruments are changed out, and the stage is prepared for the main event.

During the break, we do get drinks, though only sodas. It's too hectic to really talk, with background music playing and a cacophony of other voices in loud conversation. We use the distraction and general shuffling of people

to find a spot closer to the stage.

My nerves are thrumming. I clutch my plastic cup tightly to cover the slight shake in my fingers.

We watch the backstage crew work, readjusting microphones and testing volume levels and sound output. Then Elias and Caelan step on stage.

The reaction hits me like a truck.

Everyone screams and cheers, and I cheer with them, but it seems distant in my ears, like the faint roar of the ocean in a seashell. Everyone's so tightly packed, jostling against each other, arms raised and full of energy, yet they might as well be a mile away. I'm suddenly isolated in my own head, more acutely aware of the static tingles raising the hairs on the back of my neck than anything else.

I have enough sense to remain standing. If I were alone, though, I would have sunk to my knees.

Fuck. This isn't how I normally am at all. I've been to plenty of concerts. Why is it them? I'm not this invested. Excited, sure. I like them, yeah. It's nothing that should feel so *visceral*.

Grace had accused me of having a crush on them before. I'd laughed that off. At twenty-six, I'd hoped that I would be over childish infatuations with celebrities. I was never much one for that, even when younger, but perhaps I should reconsider my position now. Even so, no crush has felt like this—dissociated and helplessly drawn in. Seeing them in person makes my chest tighten and my heart flutter in a way I can't define.

Maybe it's *fear* because they are more than I ever could have dreamed. Both radiate power, danger, and absolute confidence.

The special effects are flawless.

Elias smiles as he steps up to the microphone, tight and controlled but quietly basking in the attention. He always tends to dress more formally in dress shirts or waistcoats. Tonight, his black jacket is tailored, deliciously form-fitting, high-necked, and almost reminiscent of a priest's robe. Ironic,

given the way the shadows dance around him, the smoke-like manifestation of some black magic or power he wields. It appears to emanate from him like a physical aura.

He's got dark hair and dark makeup smudged around dark eyes, contrasting with his ashen skin. If his 'character' were not already self-classified as a demonic entity, he'd make a convincing vampire.

I've looked. Closely. Elias doesn't have outright *fangs*, but there's a sharpness to his canines. Not monstrously so, but I've thought about them sinking into my throat.

Where Elias is more refined, with a quiet yet inexorable authority about him, Caelan demands attention with his brash nature and fierce defiance of the world at large. His style is more punk, with combat boots, ripped skinny jeans, and tight leather. He has cropped, spiky hair, a dagger strapped to his thigh, and a wickedly cruel grin.

His eyes glow. Not just from any stage lighting, but cat-like, an inhuman yellow-green with a reflective quality to them. He has pointed ears and too-sharp teeth and *claws*. Sharp black nails that make his fingers look elongated and not entirely natural. He doesn't bother with a guitar pick. He just uses those.

There's something electric about Caelan. Literally. A demon born of the blackest, fiercest storms. That's the energy he carries—lightning and destruction, something untamable but terrifyingly beautiful.

"Okay!" Grace yells to me over the roar of the crowd and the music. "They're still edgy, but they are cool."

Grace—right, she's here. Her interruption snaps me back to myself. Somewhat. I offer her what I hope is a convincing grin, but my focus is still elsewhere.

After all, how can I concentrate on anything else when Elias is singing? His voice makes me fucking weak. It's deep and smooth, perfectly clipped, but there's also something almost inhuman about it. By design, I imagine. A

reverb to it. Some kind of layering. As though the primordial, coalescent cloud of shadows crawling over him had a voice of its own, whispering echoes of every word. It only makes it even more alluring.

When I remember how to breathe again, I sing along, screaming with everyone else, and it starts to feel like a normal concert. And it's *fun*. Thrilling, even more of a rush than usual, because the effects are spectacular, the music is captivating, and they are stunning.

I'm terrified and enchanted and terrified by how enchanted I am.

They never talk much. Even when the final song crashes to a close, Elias simply stands and allows the applause, screams, and shouts to wash over him with a small smile and a curt, obligatory thanks. Caelan is less awkward about embracing the way people cheer for him. He slings his guitar around to his back and strolls to the front of the stage. He has a goddamn murder strut, the swing of his hips in those ridiculously tight ripped jeans, and squats down as if to speak directly to the audience. But he only affectionately flips us off, laughs, and then returns to join Elias as they leave the stage.

The lights raise, the volume of the crowd dulls to a lower, enthusiastic hum of chatter, and people start flowing out of the concert hall.

I stand dumbly, not quite processing what happened or that it's over.

Grace grabs my shoulder and shakes me. "C'mon. There won't be anything left at the merch table if you stand here. Are you waiting for them to come out again or something?"

"Huh? Oh. No." I pause, gathering myself. Everything is *fine*, but there's still some lingering sense of something. Like feeling the need to shiver, someone walking over your grave, but only as a subtle tension, not enough to prompt the physical response and release it. Even as we walk away, my eyes slide back to the empty stage.

I pause at the merch table, but nothing catches my eye. I already have all their albums, and the rest are the same generic offerings of every band—T-shirts, caps, and posters. None of it has anything more than the band logo,

and certainly no images of Elias or Caelan.

As we head past, I explain to Grace that they're not much for fan interaction. They seem to like their privacy more than most. I understand that. I suppose it would ruin the immersion of their whole concept if they went around out of character. So it's exceptionally rare for them to do interviews or anything.

"Oh. Mysterious," she replies, in a teasing sing-song tone, and I laugh. It's easier to laugh the further away we get. My initial reaction to them feels so stupid now.

The night air as we step outside is balmy, a lot more pleasant temperature-wise than during the day. August in LA can be stifling.

Outside the dramatic arched entrance of the concert hall half the crowd splits off into the parking lot toward the looming stadium nearby, while the other half heads down the main street. There's a whole conglomeration of food joints, and I gesture in their direction.

"Want to get something to eat? I'll pay."

"You don't have to, dumbass. I know you only work part-time," Grace replies.

Part-time, and still paying tuition while finishing a master's degree. I wrinkle my nose at the reminder.

"Whatever. That's not the point. You gave me a lift all the way up here. I'm not forgetting about the gas money either, by the way, so it's the least I can do."

"Burgers, then?"

Not that that narrows it down. There are about three different places to get burgers within a two-hundred-yard radius. But we pick our poison of a junky fast-food joint and head over.

It's packed with other concertgoers, all with the same idea of late-night snacks, but we eventually order a greasy burger each and grab a booth by the wall to sit and eat.

Grace talks about the concert, commenting on the special effects Elias and Caelan use and asking if I know how they pull any of it off. I don't. No one does. That's something they keep very much under wraps. They've baffled a few of the techies on the fan forums who tried to work it out themselves.

As we continue to eat, that unsettled feeling won't let me be. I know Grace is still feeling the adrenaline from the concert, but I don't want to talk too much about Goëtica. I need time to process my own reaction first.

The food was my suggestion, but I now realize it's doing nothing for the churning in my stomach. What if someone spiked my drink? That could explain why I suddenly felt so off, although I can't think of any potential opportunity for that to have happened.

"You okay?" Grace asks after I spend too long silent with my own thoughts. "You've been kind of out of it."

"Ah... yeah. Just thinking about the concert."

"Mmm. Why am I not surprised? You *like* them."

I wince. Or there's that possibility. "Maybe a little, I guess." But even when I had crushes on people before, relationships back when I still bothered trying with that, having feelings for someone has never been a cause for outright dissociation.

The whole thing is weird. I don't want to talk about it. So I direct the conversation toward the support band instead. Grace knew them, but I've not heard their music before today, and she's happy to share their work like I played Goëtica's songs on the drive.

She pulls out her headphones and we each take an earpiece, watching some of their music videos on her phone while we eat.

By the time we've finished, most partygoers have already left. So it's far quieter, almost softer somehow.

We head back toward the concert hall where we parked, and I can finally sense myself relaxing. It's a shame I can't see the stars—the light pollution is

far too great.

The world is muted and quiet as my ears still haven't quite adapted back to reality after the blasting music of the concert.

To fill the silence, I sing one of Goëtica's songs under my breath.

"Your voice is pretty good," Grace says.

Despite the compliment, I wave her statement away in embarrassment. I like singing. I don't like people actively listening to me. "Sorry. Habit. I always sing."

"So I hear."

Oh no. That makes it sound as though people have been talking about it. About me. I can take a pretty good guess at who, and I cringe as I duck into the passenger side of Grace's car. "Oh, jeez. I'm sure that's not in a good context. Angela?"

Grace only laughs, and I rub my face.

"You don't get along with Angela?" she asks.

Angela is a work colleague, one I share an immediate workspace with.

"Ah, it's nothing. She's not fond of my singing. Or... me in general."

I give Grace the address for my motel since I'm staying longer, and she drives westward. It's not far, only fifteen minutes by car. I still don't like making her go out of her way just to give me a ride, but it's better than the almost hour-long effort it would take on public transportation at this time of night.

Bringing up Angela turns the conversation back to work. Safe territory. It's what we always talk about, given that's where we met and always see each other, though we work in slightly different areas. I'm still working in the laboratory's reception area, receiving, processing, and preparing samples for testing, but not actually running anything. Grace is much more qualified and runs the analytical machines on the other side of the lab.

She keeps encouraging me to progress to a similar position once my master's degree is complete, but honestly, I'm far more content to work my

way up slowly. If ever. As much as I enjoy my work, it's far from a passion, and career progression isn't a priority of mine. I'd rather *not* have the stress of responsibility I don't feel ready for.

We chat about the workload, daily issues like one of the centrifuges being out of use, and the gossip Grace has picked up about other biotech firms based in the area.

Standard things.

Safe things.

Boring things.

Disconcerting as that one moment was, it seems like a fading memory already. I find myself missing the high of being at the concert.

"Is this the right place?" Grace asks, turning off into a parking lot. It's a generic roadside motel with no defining features, a dime a dozen. It was the cheapest and close enough to public transportation for onward travel tomorrow.

"Yep. This is the one. Thanks again for the lift."

" 'Course. I'm not letting you wander around any part of LA this late at night. Don't do anything dumb tomorrow, either."

I laugh. "I'm just doing some standard sightseeing shit for the weekend. I'll be back on Sunday."

"And I'll see you at work next week."

"Yeah, you got it."

I take my backpack of clothes and travel necessities from the trunk, then wave Grace off and head into the reception.

Checked in and key in hand, I make my way to the privacy of my room for the night. Just like the motel, there's nothing special about it. Generic, basic amenities, but it has a bed and space of my own to unwind.

Flopping onto the bed, I kick off my shoes, peeling down the fishnet tights beneath my skirt.

The concert was fantastic, no doubt about that, but being around people

that much is exhausting. There's something melancholy about it too, now.

The slump after the rush of adrenaline.

The silence, after Elias' captivating voice.

That thought brings another pang of longing. A much more familiar one. Old, childish wishes that have long since settled into a quiet dissatisfaction. I wish I could sing. Properly, not just under my breath or along to the stereo. I wish I weren't too shy to sing for others. I wish I had the dedication, time, and money to take lessons and improve.

I want to do something more. Create something. Be *passionate* about something. So much of life feels like I'm drifting through it. Wanting anything at all is a rare and terrifying concept.

Concerts are a double-edged sword. I adore the rush, the energy, the immersion in the music. But it always reminds me of the things I could have if I were brave enough to chase a fleeting dream, but I never will. Coming down afterward feels like crashing back to earth.

Goëtica has that energy too. They feel like... more. That nebulous *something*. A spark of adventure, passion, or excitement. Even as a gimmick, their demon personas appeal to the fantasy I still crave, that there are things out there that are incomprehensible, beautifully terrible, and far beyond the grasp of everyday reality.

The tap in the bathroom drips monotonously as I lay back on the bed, listening, and my soul aches.

Everything is *fine*. I'm doing decently for myself. *Why do I always have to think too much?* Nobody needs late-night existential crises.

Eventually, I roll over and off the edge of the bed. I need to get organized for the night, and that's the only way I'll get up. Absentmindedly, I gather up my pajamas out of my backpack and go to shower before sleeping.

The walls are probably thin, and I don't want to annoy anyone late at night, but I end up singing in the shower anyway. Just quietly. Singing is easier than thinking, making up wordless melodies as a means of expression.

There is certainly a familiarity to the dissatisfaction, the yearning for that nebulous, unattainable more. What is unfamiliar is the other hook sunk into my heart, the threads working their way through my veins.

I can't stop thinking about them. Elias. Caelan.

The idea had crossed my mind when I planned this weekend's trip to LA, but I had dismissed it as weird and maybe a little stalkerish. I know where they started out. The tiny hole-in-the-wall would-be theater where they did their first-ever gigs and where they recorded their early music videos. It's not hugely publicized, but not that hard to find either with a little digging into old records.

What would I even gain from going there? Like some strange pilgrimage of sorts. There's no record of them, no memorabilia, nothing to see. It seems almost pathetic to go so far out of my way to stand somewhere because they had once.

Why do I feel so drawn to doing it anyway?

Whatever. It's LA. Hollywood. People go on tours all the time to see where their favorite movies were filmed. They go to see the homes where celebrities live. So it's not as though it's as stalkerish as that.

There's no harm.

I settle into bed and lay on my side with my phone, searching for the address and directions. It *is* out of the way, and I don't want to carry my backpack with all my weekend gear so far, so I plan the trip for later in the afternoon after I check into the hostel I have booked tomorrow.

I check the other details I need while I'm at it. Bus and metro times to get into central LA, places I want to visit tomorrow and Sunday, double-checking the train back home. I'm trying to distract myself, and I know it.

Eventually, I can't do anything else useful, so I place my phone back on the nightstand, plug it in to charge, and then roll over to sleep, which doesn't come that easily. It never tends to. Too many thoughts running through my head, as usual. Only now they're of demons, Elias' voice dragging me down

like something hypnotic and Caelan's quiet cackle.

Tomorrow, I'll go to the theater. I'll satisfy this stupid, helpless craving and see that there's nothing there, putting my dumb infatuation behind me.

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Chapter Two

The late afternoon sun has finally dipped in the sky by the time I make it to the theater.

It's not much, though I wasn't expecting it to be. It doesn't even look like it's still in use, the red paint of the front marred by the vague white shapes of lettering where the venue name used to be.

I stare at the building, bemused. It looks abandoned, but a car is parked outside, and the door is ajar. For a moment, I stand and blink foolishly at it. Then my brain catches up. It's a Saturday evening, and the place *is* a theater. Small and rundown, but perhaps my assumption about it being closed was too hasty. Maybe they put on shows and events every so often.

I still feel stupid being here, but there's a weird appeal to returning to where it all began. I've admitted as much to myself already. If the place is open, I can probably have a quick look, at least.

The box office could be open, or perhaps there's a show or a class going on, but it'd be cool to see the lobby either way. The actual theater too, if I can.

The first videos, mostly forgotten by now, were not concept pieces like their newer work. They were recordings of them performing 'live.' That was what was recorded here. It's so familiar in my head. The red seats, the way the stage looked in the videos from back then.

It's open, but it doesn't seem entirely so. The door is partially propped ajar, but not in an overly inviting way. I don't want to barge in, so I knock before entering to announce my presence. There's no answer.

All the lights are on, but there doesn't seem to be anyone in the lobby. Maybe, if there is a show on, it's already started? I might have expected an employee to be left outside to man the front desk, but perhaps it's unnecessary for a place this size.

I walk across the carpet to the doors that lead into the theater. If something is happening, it should be audible, but pressing my ear to the door doesn't bear any results beyond more silence.

Maybe I shouldn't be here after all.

No point quitting now, though. If I've come this far, I might as well take just a peek.

I edge the door open. It's the same situation as the lobby—lights on but empty. That stage makes my heart ache—the same sort of pang as last night. Without really thinking it through, my feet move, taking me closer, up the stairs at the side, and onto the stage until I'm standing in the center.

It's a cute fantasy. To stand where they stood, to find my voice and sing as well. I feel like a kid again, playing pretend when I was twelve and would write my own songs, design albums, and put on imaginary performances.

Sweet.

Nostalgic.

Stupid.

My eyes flick out over the empty auditorium. Stupid, but no one's here, right? Maybe it'll placate some lingering craving for being part of that world.

So, I sing.

I sing one of my own songs. Maybe it's not entirely a thing I left back in childhood. It's not like I write anything seriously, though. I can manage lyrics, but I don't even have the background in music to come up with any kind of accompaniment. I could never accomplish anything with it.

But being able to pretend for a moment, to stand on stage with the freedom to raise my voice without judgment—

Clear and silvery, my voice echoes through the empty heights of the room. Somehow it seems fitting that I sing something I wrote that was inspired by Goëtica. About them, for them.

A cute fantasy, but that's all it is.

Yet it gives me chills again. I find myself slipping all too easily into the mindset of last night, oddly distant, losing myself. This time, not in Elias' voice and their presence, but in the recollection of them and my own words. This time I'm the one reaching out to them.

And then the moment is shattered.

I snap out of it in a jarring instant, biting my tongue the second I hear movement. *Shit*. Of course, there must have been someone here—there are voices now, out beyond the lobby, maybe from the staff room or around the corridors leading backstage.

I scramble down and head for the exit.

Stupid.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I should have known better than to risk bothering anyone here. *What was I even doing?*

Pressing myself against the door, I plan to edge it open and check no one is outside before making an escape. But instead, it opens for me.

I stumble forward with a small cry of alarm, colliding hard with the person on the other side. The impact sends me stumbling backward, falling hard and graceless onto my ass.

My pulse is immediately racing a mile a minute. The shock is a little disorienting, and it feels like I managed to hit my face against the door. Or something. My cheek stings.

“Sorry!” I blurt. “I’m sorry, the door was open. I didn’t mean to interrupt —”

I look up, and my heart catches in my throat, words drying up on my lips. *God, if the ground could swallow me up right now.*

The situation is so much worse than simple chagrin.

No—

Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought. Only it doesn't seem like the sort of injury to make someone hallucinate. On the other hand, it feels like this must be a hallucination because I'm neither that lucky nor unlucky, depending on perspective.

There's no way that Caelan, as in *Goëtica* Caelan, is staring down through the open doorway, looking as perplexed to see me as I am him.

Actually, no, that's a lie. Nothing could come close to how utterly lost I am right now. Perhaps that's the only thing saving me from making even more of an idiot of myself, being too shocked to react at all.

He looks exactly like he did on stage. The special effects, the prosthetics, the *character*. All of it. He looks every inch inhuman, and my eyes widen.

He's holding a dagger. I recognize it from the videos, and I think it's the same one he had last night too. It's a weapon he regularly uses. There is blood on the blade, and I crashed headfirst into him. I really, really hope I didn't piss him off.

I gulp in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize anyone was in here. I mean, I did assume there was since the door was unlocked, but I thought there might have been a show on or something, and I was curious, so..."

My rambling is thankfully interrupted by the door opening wider and another figure appearing.

"What's the problem, Caelan?" he asks.

Fuck, my stomach flips. That's, that's him, isn't it? Elias. Both of them are here.

Elias is the same. Exactly like his persona, like the videos, shadows crawling subtly against his skin. That's not possible. That shouldn't be possible. What the hell is even happening?

Elias drags his eyes down to where I'm still sprawled on the floor. His expression turns tight. Then he immediately clips Caelan around the back of the head. "What do you think you're *doing*?" Elias barks coldly.

"Oi! Cut it out, ya prick! It was an accident. I opened the door, and she was just there. It ain't my fault."

I shake myself, realizing I'm still staring like a gaping idiot. My hands are trembling, but I can't deal with that now. Pushing the shock aside to handle later, I speak up properly, "I'm okay. He's right. It was an accident. I was standing right at the door. It's my fault."

Elias casts a suspicious glance at Caelan but apparently decides to give him the benefit of the doubt. He steps forward and comes to kneel in front of me instead. "Are you all right?"

The butterflies in my stomach are creating a goddamn whirlwind. *What am I meant to make of this?*

Just running into them would be enough of a surprise. But they're *them*, like on stage or in the videos. The special effects—except it can't be special effects. Not here, not like this. There's no editing in real life that could make them look like that.

There's a sense of power about them, of something *other*, something that doesn't fit into the real world quite right. To be fair, the effects aren't as exaggerated as on video or at the concert. But there's a faint, glitching electrical energy around Caelan, and the aura of darkness surrounding Elias, though far more subtle now. The world seems to warp ever so slightly as I look at them, as if it doesn't quite want to accept their existence here.

The personas they act as on stage suddenly don't seem like an act at all.

It *can't* be, but the evidence before my eyes says otherwise. Otherworldly entities. Demons. That was what their 'personas' were. They definitely don't appear human.

If they are demons, if they're in any way like in their music videos, they are not exactly the nicest of people to be running into.

I respect them. Their creativity and confidence is inspiring. And the way I felt at the concert yesterday was... something. Their narrative was captivating for what I *thought* it was. Fictional. But suddenly, the image is incredibly clear in my mind. Caelan has used that dagger to split open a victim's skin and toy with the blood that welled to the surface for the sake of aesthetic for the camera.

They're morally gray at best.

They are dangerous.

I have no idea what they'll make of me or what they're going to do.

Except Elias sounds concerned right now, genuinely, and that's even more confusing.

Panic flutters in my chest, and it tastes like copper on my tongue. I need to find out exactly what I'm dealing with here.

"Y-yeah. I'm okay. Just a little startled," I begin. My voice comes out far too shaky, fear obvious.

Dammit.

Then I notice Elias staring specifically at the side of my face, where I thought I got hit.

I'm starting to readjust to the fact that this is apparently my bizarre reality now, and as the shock eases, I can focus more on the sensation. It hurts. It hurts a lot more than it should for having fallen into the door, which was what I'd assumed had happened. But it doesn't just feel bruised. It feels *warm?*

I lift my hand to my cheek. Warm and seemingly wet as well. When I pull it away, there's blood on my fingers. A lot of blood. "Oh."

I didn't crash face-first into Caelan. I crashed face-first into his knife.

Being sprawled on the floor with both looming over me is getting more than a little intimidating. With determination and panic, I push myself up and scramble to my feet. It's possibly not the best idea I've ever had. My head spins, and now the wound on my cheek is *pulsing*.

“Whoa, hey,” Caelan protests, darting to grab my shoulder when I tilt forward.

“I’m okay,” I insist. Instinct screams to not show weakness. Besides, it’s not a lie. It’s not like I’ve lost that much blood. The combination of shock and standing too fast is what has me feeling dizzy for a moment. *Probably*.

“You should sit down,” Elias suggests, placing his hand on the small of my back. Stools line one wall of the lobby, and Elias guides me to one, where I take his advice and sit.

My hands grip either side of the stool to steady myself. It’s not so much the cut that’s bothering me. While it is sore, and the amount of blood pumping out is alarming, it’s a head wound. They always bleed a lot. It’s probably not even that bad. In a weird, masochistic sort of way, I don’t exactly mind. It’s not like I didn’t *enjoy* the aesthetic of that video with Caelan and the dagger or thought about what it would be like to be in the victim’s place.

No. The cut doesn’t bother me. It’s *them*, the way they are acting compared to some of the things I’ve seen.

It was all supposed to be a stupid fantasy. I believed they were just acting for a few cool videos. Now, seeing them in person, it’s hard to reconcile when they are so clearly inhuman—every inch the deadly, otherworldly beings they portray.

I have never judged them as people based on their music before. But if it’s not for show, if they’re actually these *things*, then how much is even made up? I have no idea what to expect from them.

And yet, they’re being nice. Shockingly nice, considering the whole demon thing.

Elias reaches out and cups my face in his hand—he’s touching me. He’s actually touching me, and I desperately will myself not to blush. Then he turns my head so he can inspect the cut and frowns.

“Caelan, see if you can find a first-aid kit and something to wipe up this

blood, would you?”

“What am I, your goddamn errand boy?” Caelan complains but doesn’t show any hesitation in searching for the required items. Probably because it’s extremely obvious they’re needed.

That leaves me alone with Elias for a moment, and what the *hell* am I meant to say? My chest is tight. I have so many questions, but my head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton. I don’t even know where to start.

“Why are you doing this?” I finally ask. “I mean, looking after me.”

Elias cocks his head as he stares at me. “Why wouldn’t we? It’s Caelan’s fault you were harmed.”

“Oh. I mean, not really. I was somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be, and he didn’t know I was there, so...” I don’t know why I feel the need to defend Caelan or take all the blame on myself. I cut myself short. “I guess I wasn’t expecting you to be so nice.”

Not after realizing that it’s no gimmick—they are actual supernatural creatures.

The smile on Elias’ face has a cold, ironic twist to it. “Make no mistake, dear. We’re not *good* people by any means. But what you see in the videos we make is... exaggerated and reference to times long past. If that’s your concern.”

I nod. That makes sense.

“I presume by the fact you clearly recognized us that you are a fan.” His hand brushes against mine, just the lightest of touches, but it’s enough to make my breath catch. “It’s your attention and your adoration that is most important to us. Why would we drive you away by hurting you?”

Oh, God. He’s extremely close. I’ve seen this too, how he acts so charming to get what he wants. Playing the part of the smooth, suave man of seduction. At least until the act breaks down to reveal the truth beneath—a simmering, vengeful animosity against the world.

“I don’t know. You always seemed so angry.”

How much of what I've seen in their songs and videos is a true reflection, and how much is just exaggeration, like Elias says? Maybe there's some truth because I don't miss the way Elias' eyes flash with a subdued rage that I've seen before.

"Not at you, darling. *You* are not the one I have any quarrel with."

That seems like a subject not worth pushing on any further.

Fortunately, there isn't any chance to. "All right, shove over," Caelan says as he returns, and Elias obligingly steps aside.

"Did you find what we need?"

"It'll do. Come here." The last part is addressed toward me, and I start slightly as Caelan takes hold of my face, gripping my jaw between his fingers. He's not exactly gentle, but it doesn't hurt either—just keeping me steady as he takes a dampened paper towel and starts wiping the blood away from the cut.

It's a good thing he has several because they end up soaking through quickly. Caelan tosses the sopping, blood-stained towels into a heap on the counter behind the stool. I catch sight of Elias' expression turning up in distaste out of the corner of my eye.

"Do you always have to make such a mess of everything?"

"Throw 'em away yourself if you care," Caelan shoots back. He's more focused on his task. Too focused, almost.

I swallow, not quite able to forget how much he seems to like that dagger of his. And cutting people. Elias might not have any intention of hurting me, but Caelan—Caelan's always been much more violent, more of a wildcard.

I tense in his grip, but Caelan doesn't do anything. He's simply muttering to himself, static-like little nothings as he patches the cut with gauze over the top and medical tape to keep it in place.

"Um... thank you," I say as he steps away, job complete.

"Dammit," is his only response. "That's gonna need changing soon. It's seeping through already."

Elias grunts. “Maybe you shouldn’t have cut her so deep.”

“It’s not like I meant to!”

“That makes a change.”

“It’s okay,” I interrupt. Although they’re snarking at each other, it doesn’t sound serious. More like that’s the dynamic they have. Antagonistic, but in a playful way. Still, it’s a little overwhelming. “It was an accident. I don’t mind. I... kind of like it. It’ll look badass. Right?”

Caelan looks at me properly for the first time. Eyes narrowed like he’s trying to work out if I mean it or I’m putting on a brave face. His eyes are unnatural too. Like a cat’s, a lurid yellow-green with slit pupils. It’s unsettling.

“We never introduced ourselves,” he says, then holds out his hand. His fingers look even more claw-like up close, and when he smiles, he has a mouth full of teeth that are too sharp. “Caelan.”

“Um.” I take his hand and let him shake it. “My name is Shannon.”

“Shannon,” he repeats, a hint of a purr in his voice. His eyes drag back up to the cut on my cheek. “You like it?”

Wait.

Wait, he’s getting the wrong idea. Just because I can appreciate the aesthetic of a little bit of mild gore doesn’t mean anything. Not necessarily. That video with the knife—videos, plural—is far from an isolated incident. When Caelan is involved, it is equal parts horrifying and fascinating. I’d watched those videos with my stomach twisting in a mess of different emotions. The last thing I want is to talk about it with the goddamn demon responsible.

I squirm in my seat. “I should go clean up the rest of the blood.”

It’s not an elegant dodge of the question by any means, but it is true enough. The blood has run all the way down my face, over my neck, and to my chest, soaking into my top. Beneath the fabric, it is sticky, wet, and unpleasant. Caelan might have cleaned away most of what was visible, but I

really need to take my top off and thoroughly wring that out too.

“There are bathrooms here, right? I’ll go clean up in the sinks, wash my top out, and whatever.”

“Do you have anything to change into?” Elias asks.

“Oh. No, I was going to put it back on. It’s not like it won’t dry in two minutes with the heat outside.”

Caelan mutters something rude and particularly creative about LA weather and Satan’s asshole, and a small, slightly shaky laugh escapes me before I can help it.

Elias raises an eyebrow at Caelan’s comment but says nothing. Instead, he simply slides his jacket from his shoulders and offers it to me. He’s wearing a sleek, well-tailored modern suit today, too nice to risk staining with blood, but that doesn’t seem to concern him. “Wear this until your top dries. We’ll hang it outside. As you say, it shouldn’t take long.”

I freeze, brain still back on the moment he started casually removing his clothing. “You don’t need to…” I start, flustered, but trail off at the look in Elias’ eyes.

He’s not exactly saying it as a command in any way. There is nothing harsh about it, but it’s clear he expects to be obeyed. He’s right, I suppose. It’s the best solution. I’m being stupid and getting flustered over nothing like a goddamn idiot.

I take the jacket. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Sliding off the stool, I hurry to the bathroom, hoping neither of them noticed how red my face was getting.

With a moment of privacy, at last, I groan and bury my head in my hands. I don’t—*honestly, what the hell am I meant to make of any of this?* Elias. And Caelan. *Demons?* It kind of breaks all my understanding of reality, but at the same time, I don’t think it could possibly be just a hallucination of some sort. It feels too real for that.

I can’t make head or tail of what—*who*—they are. I never had any idea

about who they really were—that much is obvious. Elias said they weren't good people. If the videos are any indication, they're dangerous. Dangerous is an understatement. But at the same time, I can see a lot of humanity in them. The way they interact with each other, with me. They can be sharp but not cruel. Not evil.

They've been genuinely nice to me, all things considered. Trespassing, running into them, they had a right to be mad. Yet they went to the effort of fixing up my face, Elias lent me his jacket, and—I'm not imagining it, am I? Because I swear, he was flirting earlier as well.

And that—God, that's a whole can of worms right there. Because, fine. *Fine*. Maybe I have a crush on them, despite them most definitely being the bad guys they present themselves as. That makes them hotter. But it was only ever meant to be fictional, personas they used as a gimmick for the band. I was never supposed to meet them, most certainly not as demons, but now they're here and being goddamn *nice*.

I don't know what to think. It's making it incredibly difficult to keep it together.

If I can get out of this without embarrassing myself horribly or getting murdered, I'll count that as a victory.

But, back to the matter at hand, since I can't hide in the bathroom forever.

I carefully place Elias' suit jacket to one side, then strip off my top and stuff it into the sink. The water turns a vivid red the second I run the tap.

There's a lot of blood. Curiosity piques, and I desperately want to see what the wound looks like. How bad it is. Will it scar? But seeing it would require taking the gauze off, and given it's already soaked through, the cut is probably still bleeding. It would be better to keep it bandaged for the time being.

I rinse out as much blood as possible, then wring my top out and hang it over the hand drier while I clean myself off. It's probably a good thing I wore this top today. It's tight-fitting enough to provide support and has ruffled

layers that disguise everything, so I never bother wearing a bra with it, which makes one less thing that didn't get blood-soaked and potentially ruined. The top should be okay. It's black, so it won't stain visibly.

But there's a downside to that too. No bra means I have to wear Elias' jacket with literally nothing on underneath.

I stare at myself in the mirror as I put the jacket on. That sure is a look, all right. Not a bad one, actually. It would be cute as an outfit for a night out, maybe. A suit jacket and nothing underneath, if the jacket fit better.

The problem is more that it's clearly not my jacket, it's several sizes too big. And being topless beneath it. There's a lot of cleavage visible, including some spectacular side boob if looked at from the right angle. Then add the cut on my face from Caelan's knife. It looks compromising, and I have to go out and face them both looking like this.

Taking a deep breath, I steady myself. It's *fine*. They're fine. They're goddamn demons, but they're not awful. Apparently. They'll understand.

I thought I'd done a decent job of grounding myself and preparing to face Elias and Caelan again. But then I walk back out to find that, in the absence of his jacket, Elias has rolled up his sleeves and undone several of the top buttons of his shirt and—God. His *hands*.

They alone stir my interest. Big and strong, I can see the patterns on the veins along the back of them. They'd look so good pinning someone down.

So much for playing it cool. I can feel a touch of heat rising back to my face already.

Chagrined, I shake the thought off and try to pay attention to the more important details. Like the fact that Elias and Caelan are standing together with a camera, going over some footage and bickering about it. *Were they filming something?* Do they *still* use this place for videos sometimes? That would explain what they're doing here.

They look over as I approach, and my stomach flips. Caelan isn't subtle at all. He blinks, clearly doing a mental double-take, then his eyes drop to drink

in how much Elias' jacket doesn't cover. It's not a lot of cleavage, but enough.

He grins. "Good look, doll."

"Hush. It wasn't my idea."

Elias isn't so overt, but I can feel his eyes on me, and there's a quietly appreciative look in his expression. It's flattering, honestly. Maybe I shouldn't be flattered. I shouldn't be interested in them. But with the way they look at me, I can almost believe there's a chance they could be interested in return, and that thought is kind of nice. They're probably *not*.

"Let me take that for you," Elias offers, holding out his hand. *Right. The wet top.* I pass it over to him, and he takes it outside to hang in the last of the evening sunlight.

That means I'm going to be stuck here at least a little longer, doesn't it? I can't leave until I give Elias his jacket back, at the very least.

I return to the stools and tables, boosting myself up and perching on one of the counters. Caelan is still holding the camera, and I give it a curious glance.

"Were you guys filming stuff here?"

"Yeah," Caelan says with a shrug. "Just dicking around for the time being. Hashing out some ideas for videos for the next album. It's easier to do it here."

"How come?"

"I dunno. Creative freedom, I guess."

"Do music videos these days not have an entire team behind them? Film crews and everything? Or do you do that later?"

Caelan barks a laugh. "Fuck 'em. We're *meant* to, but it's stupid. Having to pretend to be humans pretending to be demons for a bunch of up-their-ass nerds."

"Caelan, don't be a brat," Elias says as he returns. He lightly clips Caelan around the back of the head again. It almost appears more of a hair ruffle.

“They’re professionals, and they do their job to the best of their abilities. But, to answer your question...” he turns his attention to me now, “... it is simply easier to avoid getting too many others involved. Although we can take a human form near flawlessly, should a camera crew realize while filming that the ‘special effects’ are beyond what they or any of the team are doing, and with their working experience and expertise in the field, they *would* notice, the situation becomes rather awkward. It’s simply easier to film by ourselves.”

“Never expected we’d end up with half a goddamn filmography degree’s worth of accidental knowledge, but shit happens,” Caelan adds.

“Okaaaay,” I say. It makes sense. Or, at least, it makes sense after accepting the whole demon thing. Which I still need some time to process. Right now, it is too much to take at once. My brain is numb from shock. I might as well accept their reasoning—it’s hardly the weirdest thing about the whole situation. “So that’s why you’re here?”

“Yes. We had a spare day before being required for further shows, so we figured we would take advantage of the time,” Elias explains.

“This place is basically shut down, and we have free run of it to do what we like, no assholes breathing over our shoulders. It’s pretty cool.”

“And what about *you*?” Elias asks smoothly.

I blink, finding him staring me down with a scrutinizing gaze that feels far too intense.

“What’s the reason you’re here? I think perhaps that is the more pressing concern.”

Oh. That. Shit. I don’t even know how to explain it to myself, never mind to him. “I knew about this place from some of your videos. The location name was mentioned once, and I looked it up because I thought it was interesting. Anyway, I was around the area, so I thought I’d take a look.”

He’s still watching me closely, with eyes that are dark enough to look almost entirely black. There’s no denying it’s intimidating. I want to shrink

away beneath his gaze—it’s like it could pierce right through my soul. As much as I stumble over my words and try to make them sound casual and unimportant, he’s not buying that façade.

“That seems quite dedicated,” he finally comments lowly, almost a touch of a purr to the statement. “To us?”

I can feel my face heating up. God. Why does he have to say it like *that*?

Elias steps forward to stand in front of me. My knees are slightly parted with the way I’m sitting on the counter, and all of a sudden, I find them framing either side of his waist. The additional height from being perched up here puts me face to face with Elias, and there’s nowhere for me to look except right at him. Staring at him so close is making my heart skip in a strange way.

“Did you come to seek us out, dear? Because it seems you found us. And such dedication *is* appreciated. Perhaps a reward is in order.”

“I... uh...” If it wasn’t before, I’m certain my face must be bright red by now.

Caelan snorts, thankfully rescuing me from having to respond to that. “Christ. Reaching much? Goddamn creeper.”

“I was only teasing. There’s no need to be jealous, Caelan.”

“Jealous of what? Your complete lack of charm?”

Elias laughs at that. The insult is thoroughly baseless, and they both know it. He was certainly doing a damn good job of leaving me flustered. And, although it’s still utterly bizarre, I can’t deny I was sort of enjoying having Elias flirt with me.

Even though I’m not sure why he’d want to be flirting with me at all.

That thought is sobering. They’ve only been pleasant thus far. But even if I’m starting to get a feel for their personalities, it would be stupid to forget they’re demons. Not human, that’s for sure. And who the hell can know the motivations of creatures like that?

“Wait,” I ask abruptly. “Stupid question, but if you’re, um... demons?”

Why the *hell* are you here? Going on tour, making music videos, and pretending to have a band, of all things? That seems so bizarre and convoluted.”

Both pairs of unnatural eyes settle on me. Elias slowly raises an eyebrow and Caelan cackles.

“Um... I mean. I’m sorry, it’s not any of my business,” I quickly backtrack.

Caelan is the one who answers. “Because it’s *fun*. That’s all any of this is. Your adoration. Your attention. So fucking adorable.”

“It serves its purpose well enough,” is all Elias offers.

That answers nothing. I still have so many other questions tumbling in a mess through my head. “Are there other demons? Are you everywhere?”

The two of them share a glance. Elias visibly shuts down, his expression hardening, and Caelan’s lips turn up in a momentary sneer.

“Not so much in your pretty little reality. Un-fuckin’-*fortunately*, we’re stuck here. No higher being with any sense would want to hang around by choice.”

“Caelan,” Elias warns firmly.

Yeah, this isn’t my business.

“Do you have any idea the *power* we used to command, doll?” Caelan says sharply. Bitterly. “I had more souls at my disposal than I would ever need. They *worshiped* me. And were fuckin’ terrified. That was annoying, admittedly. They’d just look at me and scream.”

“Probably because you kept torturing them.”

Caelan shoots Elias a look of irritation. “I wouldn’t have had to if they just shut up and did what they were told. Fuckin’ wails of the damned are irritating as shit.”

Christ. This conversation sure took a turn. I shift uncomfortably, not willing to speak up again just yet.

“But *you*,” Caelan says, and now he’s the one moving far too close into

my personal space. I gulp. “Your kind are so much more fun to play with. You can’t even comprehend the full scale of what beings like Elias and I can do.”

He stops abruptly, gripping my chin again and lifting my face so I have no choice but to look him in the eye. “Are you afraid right now?”

“A... a little.”

He laughs, baring his too-sharp teeth. “A *little*. Exactly. You have no idea how afraid you should be, so instead, you’re all just *fascinated*. Just sitting there, watching, enamored with our show. It’s...” Caelan pauses, shifting his weight on the balls of his feet. An odd look of pleasure crosses his face. “It’s flattering. Attention born of adoration instead of fear. A few songs, some quaint music videos, pretending like it’s ‘special effects.’ All it takes is a few glitches here and there, and you’re *begging* for me. Screaming my name. You want me so bad.”

I know. I know he’s referring to their following as a band and how everyone at the shows would cheer in delight when they showed off their power. But it feels personal, hitting a little too close to home.

Screaming his name. Wanting him.

Even though he’s being intense, almost terrifying like this, it doesn’t diminish his attractiveness. It makes fear curl in my gut, but a touch of interest too. Dammit. *Dammit*. There was a reason I liked their portrayal so much in fiction. But fiction is fiction, and this is...

He steps back, leaving my head spinning and my heart pounding.

“So, yeah, whatever. We don’t need a dumb band, really. But it’s fun.”

“Fun,” I echo, my heart too much in my throat to even think of anything halfway coherent to say.

Caelan shrugs. “Might as well make the most of it if we’re stuck here. Gotta do *something*. Otherwise, I’d just be stuck with this goddamn dick eternally.” He jerks his head toward Elias, who huffs out a laugh.

“All right. If you’re done, Caelan,” Elias says.

Caelan waves a dismissive hand. “We ain’t doing anything else.”

“I think you’re overwhelming her.”

“I’m okay,” I say, but the shaky note in my voice belies the claim. I slightly regret asking about any of it at all.

Elias shoots Caelan a withering look, then reassuringly strokes his fingers along the back of my hand. “Regardless, that was a very long time ago. Much has changed. We have. There is no sense in hurting those who are no threat to us now. Neither of us will harm you here.”

“Um... thanks.” How eloquent. Maybe it is a little overwhelming because my hand is trembling beneath his.

“How about we forget all that and fix your face up a little better, hmm?”

Oh. Right. The cut on my cheek doesn’t feel any worse than a dull ache now, but the gauze has long since soaked through with blood and needs replacing.

“Caelan, were there any wound closure strips in the first-aid kit? Those would be more suitable.”

“If there were, I would’ve used them. I’m not stupid.”

Elias nods. “Fair enough. Are you up for a trip to the drugstore?” The latter question is directed at me.

I glance down at myself, then up at Elias, and raise both eyebrows. I’m still only wearing his jacket with nothing underneath. There’s no way I’m going anywhere public like this. “It’s okay. We can replace the gauze, right? And I’ll take my top back and get out of your hair.”

Elias laughs softly. “At least allow us to make it up to you. You were injured because of Caelan’s carelessness, after all.”

“He didn’t know I was there—”

“He did. We knew someone was here. Do you really think we wouldn’t have enough sense to notice? And yet he went barging around with a blade raised, regardless. You have a lovely voice, dear.”

I stare at him, eyes widening. Oh, God. They *heard* that?

“Allow us to make it up to you,” Elias concludes.

Caelan cackles from the sidelines. “Smooth.”

Dammit. It’s easy for them to leave me flustered and off balance, and it’s not fair. “A drugstore isn’t exactly a romantic venture,” I quip, being facetious to lessen my embarrassment and tension.

“How about we take you to dinner afterward, then?”

Well. That backfired *spectacularly*. I don’t know what I expected. “I was kidding,” I splutter, “I didn’t mean—”

“Do you *not* want to go out to dinner?”

“I don’t, I mean, that’s not...” God. This is a terrible idea. They’re *dangerous*. I don’t doubt that instinct. Dangerous but alluring, and Elias is being so damn charming about it. And they’re the two members of Goëtica. I admired them. I let them inspire me. They’re so much more than I could have ever imagined. I *want* to spend more time with them.

I’ve heard people say, “never meet your heroes,” but “never meet your heroes because they might turn out to be *actual demons*” is new.

Am I that desperate for attention, that needy for something more exciting in my life, that I’m going to take such a stupid risk by accepting their offer?

Fuck it. Apparently, I am.

“Dinner sounds nice,” I say. “With, uh... just you, or...”

Caelan grins. “Both of us. Technically, *I* found you first, and I’m not about to let this dick muscle in completely.”

“You found her with your knife,” Elias says, deadpan.

Caelan only shrugs again, at least looking mildly apologetic. I give him a small smile. No major harm was done, and I don’t think they would’ve given me half the attention they have if it hadn’t been for that. So, I guess I’m not complaining.

And then there’s also the ‘both of them’ thing.

Caelan just winks at me.

“Hopeless,” Elias murmurs.

He slides an arm around my waist and lifts me from the counter, making me squeak in surprise. For just a moment while he's guiding me down, I end up held firmly against his chest, and I'm once more very aware of my current clothing situation. And how much my cleavage is pressing against him.

Was that on purpose? He seems to hold on longer than necessary.

Not wanting to be left out, Caelan cuts in and replaces Elias' arm with his own. He casually rests his hand on my waist as he guides me out of the lobby and back outside. Elias doesn't look overly impressed.

The attention is surreal. Extremely flattering, no doubt about that. It can't last. I'm not stupid enough to imagine that. It's probably like a groupie thing. They must pick up fans together all the time. But, even knowing that, is it wrong to enjoy the moment?

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Chapter Three

The car parked in front of the building belongs to them. That much is obvious now. Elias picks up my top as we pass, left drying over the low fence at the side of the drive. It's still damp but mostly all right to wear again. Only I can't exactly get changed here without flashing them, and they're already getting into the car—no time to run back to the bathrooms to change.

Elias is driving, and Caelan pulls me into the back seat with him.

I suddenly recall all those warnings about not getting into cars with strange men.

God. Everything about this is a terrible idea, isn't it?

Too late to back out now.

Besides, they're not exactly strangers. It's weird. I feel like I've known them for as long as I've been listening to their music. But knowing them through videos, songs, and shows is very different than knowing them in person. More so than ever imaginable in their case. And although I know *them*, they know nothing about me. So it's an odd situation—a parasocial relationship, nothing more.

What I know should be plenty of reason *not* to go anywhere with them, but self-preservation has never been a strong suit of mine.

Caelan doesn't let go of my waist, even though there's no reason for him to still be holding on. We could have settled properly in the seats, but no. He

sits to one side, and I end up half in the middle seat, half sharing his, close enough that our thighs are pressing together. It's still making my heart flutter.

He grins when I relax enough to lean against him.

The drive isn't long. Ten minutes at maximum, straight down the road.

"I'm not getting out like this," I inform them as Elias pulls into the parking lot of a big box drugstore.

"Of course. Stay here with Caelan... Caelan, behave yourself."

"What's that look for? I wasn't gonna do anything."

"I will be *two minutes*," Elias warns.

I had rather hoped that they would both leave, giving me the opportunity to get changed, at least. No such luck. It's certainly not that I mind the company, just that I'd kind of like to put my tits away at some point.

I self-consciously tug the jacket a little more closed.

"Hey. Shannon, yeah?" Caelan says with a sweet smirk.

"You said you'd behave," I remind him.

"Maybe I lied." He rests his chin on my shoulder, tilting his head to tug at my earlobe with his teeth. "Do you want me to behave?"

"Um..." I bit my lip.

This is—this is happening, huh? And I *want* it to happen. Better judgment screams to stop, but it's easily drowned out by desire and how heady the attention is. I'd felt hooked by them from the start.

Okay. Fine. I like them—a lot more than I should.

Caelan's lips press soft kisses against the side of my neck as I lean against him, his arm around me. Initially, I thought it was just wishful thinking that they could really be interested in me in return. But it's becoming exceptionally difficult to maintain plausible deniability for that theory. Caelan's hand slides inside the front of Elias' jacket, and yeah, this is happening.

For a moment, I wonder if I'm really going to go along with this because of a stupid crush and the fact they showed me a bit of kindness. But I already

know the answer to that is ‘yes.’

He cups my breast, and I make a quiet sound halfway between a gasp and a moan. “Ah... no. You don’t have to stop.”

“You’re cute,” Caelan mumbles, peppering me with little kisses. There’s a hint of teeth in them now, tiny nips that sting in a good way.

I honestly wasn’t expecting this to escalate so quickly, but I can’t find it in me to complain. Not when Caelan’s touch is sending shivers through me, my face flushing and breath quickening.

“Question,” he says.

It’s kind of hard to focus when his hand is kneading my breasts because, oh, okay, that feels far too good, but I make a vaguely affirmative sort of noise.

“What did you mean when you said you *liked* this?”

He traces a line on my cheek below the gauze bandage with the tip of one of his clawed fingernails, wordlessly explaining what he means by ‘this.’

“I... uh.” I squirm against him. Not to get away, because I really don’t want to do that. More because I’m far too warm, and I shouldn’t be getting turned on just from having Caelan grope me a little. This is going to be so awkward when Elias gets back, but I really don’t want him to stop.

Also, I don’t exactly know how to answer his question.

“I ain’t gonna judge,” Caelan prompts, seeing my hesitation.

“I’ve thought about it,” I admit. “You. And the knife. What it’d be like if you cut me...”

“Oh, I like you,” Caelan purrs. “Tell me more.”

He rolls my nipple beneath his thumb, and I can’t hold back a moan. “Not too deep, but just. Pressing the blade against my throat until it draws the slightest hint of blood, o-or trailing the tip over me—”

I cut off abruptly, nearly jumping out of my skin as the car door opens. Caelan reacts far quicker, removing his hands in an instant and reclining back against his seat like a picture of innocence.

Except for his shit-eating grin.

Elias levels a glower at him. “Why do I ever trust you with anything?”

Somehow that statement, the fact that Elias *knows*, only makes my face flush even brighter. He makes no further comment, though, just settles in the back seat to join the two of us, opening the box of wound closure strips he’s acquired.

“Come here,” Elias says, and I shuffle closer to allow him to inspect my cheek.

His touch feels soothing against my overheated face. He seems to run several degrees cooler than a normal person, but I kind of like that. He’s gentle as he removes the medical tape and gauze, careful not to pull on the wound, and frowns.

“Is it okay?” I ask. I haven’t seen the extent of the damage yet, after all.

“Yes. The bleeding has stopped. It needs another clean, though.” He sighs. “I should have bought wipes as well.”

“Psh. Give her here,” Caelan says. He turns my face to him, thumb tracing over the line of the cut before he leans in and licks it clean.

“Caelan!” I splutter in protest. But he’s insistent, and the feeling of his tongue lapping the edge of the cut is *something*. It sends a flash of heat to my gut, and fuck, that’s not helping this whole situation. I bite my lip to hold back any embarrassing noises.

“That’s hardly sanitary,” Elias says. Notably only after Caelan is finished.

It really isn’t, but Caelan clearly doesn’t give a shit. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. It would be unsafe and utterly foolish for any normal person to pull a stunt like that, but do demons have to worry about blood-borne infections? Probably not.

I don’t trust myself to make any comment, so I allow Elias to dab disinfectant over the wound. He carefully presses the edges together and sticks the closure strips over it, ensuring it stays neat and secure.

“Better?” he asks.

I nod. Definitely better than having the chunky, blood-soaked gauze stuck to my face.

“Good. Now, I believe we promised you dinner. To make up for the inconvenience of... all this.” He lightly brushes his fingers over my injured cheek again, and I shiver at the touch. “Where would you like to eat?”

“I really don’t mind. It’s not like I know any restaurants around here.” It’s such a shitty answer, and I regret it the moment the words leave my mouth.

“Don’t do anywhere too fuckin’ fancy,” Caelan complains. “I hate the stuck-up douchebags at those places.”

“Yes. I recall having to hold you back from clawing the eyes out of several people next to us the last time I tried to take you somewhere nice,” Elias says dryly as if it’s a common occurrence and nothing more than a mild inconvenience.

“Whatever. They were staring too much.”

Which is—horrifying, honestly, but somehow there’s something morbidly humorous in the way he makes the statement so casually. I can’t help but laugh despite myself. Then some of the other implications sink in. “So, I guess you do this often, then? Take fans out?”

I was expecting as much. This must be some sort of groupie thing. There’s no other explanation.

“No,” Elias says, and I blink in surprise. “We have, in the past, but it gets wearisome having to maintain a human façade consistently throughout such interactions.”

“Gig’s already up for you, at least,” Caelan comments.

“In any case, most often, it is just Caelan and I.”

“Wait.” A frown knits my brow. “The two of you, like...”

“We’re not *together* or anything,” Caelan dismisses. “Tried that. Can’t stand being permanently attached to this prick. But sometimes the hate sex is... decent. I’ll say that much.”

Elias makes a small noise of amusement at Caelan’s evaluation. “Hate sex

is all it is now, is it? As though you're not the one who—”

“Shut it.”

Elias smirks, then clears his throat. “Regardless. There is certainly some contention in the matter, and whatever we have can be... antagonistic, relationship-wise. It works out better for both of us if there is someone else involved to act as a counterbalance.”

My mind is still back on the concept of the two of them together. That sure is generating some mental images. I swallow, trying to shake the thought from my head. “Okay,” I say, still slightly blindsided. “Um. Restaurants.”

“Restaurants,” Elias agrees. He looks like he’s laughing at my bewildered expression, though not in an unkind way.

“What’s close?” Caelan asks, draping himself over my shoulders. I startle for a moment at the touch. He’s so casual and comfortable with it already. “I really can’t be bothered to go far.”

“Oh, uh. I can check?” I offer, fishing my phone out of the pocket of my jeans. Caelan watches from behind me as I flick over to the map app and search the local area. I pick the nearest location, which seems to have good reviews. “What about this? It’s only a few blocks away.”

“What sort of restaurant is it?” Elias says.

“French, it looks kind of upscale?”

Elias hums approvingly, but Caelan wrinkles his nose. “French?”

I pause, tempted to laugh. It’s gradually becoming clear that teasing and snarking at each other is a familiar dynamic for them. “I don’t think I’ve ever tried proper French cuisine myself, come to think of it.”

“What the heck do French people eat anyway?” Caelan grumbles. “Apart from snails, frogs’ legs, and baguettes.”

“Wine?” I suggest.

“Oh, and cheese,” Caelan adds.

Elias looks at both of us with a pained expression, and this time, I do burst into a laugh. “I’m kidding,” I say. “I promise I’m not actually that

ignorant.”

“Unfortunately, Caelan is.”

“Hey.”

I turn away from them, burying my head back in my phone to hide my smile. This is—dammit. My heart skips, and it’s not solely because of my stupid, misguided attraction to them. They’re something otherworldly. They can absolutely be kind of terrifying, and yet I’m here just *joking* with them. Having fun. Forgetting about all my preconceived notions and finding I really like the two of them.

God, I’m getting in way too deep.

I click on the option to get directions to the restaurant, offering my phone to Elias so he can check the route. “Shall we try it?”

“I don’t see why not.”

They rearrange themselves in the car, Elias returning to the driver’s seat while Caelan removes himself from my shoulders. It’s an even shorter journey than the previous one, barely two minutes. Then I realize the significant problem the restaurant poses.

“Shit. I need to get changed before going in.”

“I don’t see why you have to,” Caelan purrs, shooting another appreciative glance my way.

There’s nowhere I can get changed with any privacy. Unless I go into the restaurant and use the bathroom there, but that would still require walking in wearing nothing but Elias’ jacket, which I would rather avoid.

But perhaps I feel more confident around them. A little bolder. “I’m going to change here,” I warn them. Then, before my nerve fails me, I undo the buttons on the suit jacket and slide it off my shoulders. For one long moment, I’m completely topless in front of Caelan and Elias. Although it’s not like Caelan wasn’t already groping me earlier, but—

Embarrassment rapidly catches up to me, and I fumble for my top to pull it over my head.

Caelan lets out a low whistle. “Nice,” he says, and I can feel my face blushing even brighter.

Jesus. What the fuck possessed me to do that?

Sheepishly, I offer Elias his jacket back. He doesn’t comment on my little display, but there’s a new darkness in his eyes as he looks at me with desire. It makes my stomach flip to realize he’s looking at *me* like that.

“A-anyway. We should go in.”

Elias opens the car door and holds out his hand to help me out of the car, almost like a proper gentleman. As he does so, I realize that all of a sudden, he’s different. Caelan, too, as I turn to look back at him. The change happens so subtly that I almost don’t notice it.

They appear human.

Not that they hadn’t before. They’ve always been significantly humanoid, at least. But they still had the lingering remnants of their demonic forms. The ashen pallor of Elias’ skin compared to the shadowy second form that lingers around him. The glow of Caelan’s eyes, his claws, the tiny brief flickers of electricity that sometimes seemed to spark across his forearms.

I’m so used to them looking like that in their music videos, and having seen them live in concert like that, it hadn’t seemed unusual or out of place at all. Until I suddenly had the contrast of their perfectly human glammers to compare it to.

It’s incredibly surreal.

It’s understandable, though. They can’t get away with interacting like demons permanently. They must have to present as humans whenever they’re out in public, whenever they go somewhere such as a restaurant like this, for meetings and business appointments, and whatever other obligations they have. No wonder it gets tiresome.

The restaurant looks moderately busy inside but not packed, which is good. Hopefully, we can get away without having a reservation because none of us thought that far ahead. Then again, Elias probably doesn’t need

reservations.

It's still hard to sift out what's true for them and what's simply embellishment for the sake of the lore of their band, but if the things I've seen of him are anything to go by, Elias has his own ways of getting whatever he wants—black magic, hypnotic, mind game sort of ways.

In any case, it certainly doesn't seem to take long for us to be seated. We end up at a table in the corner, out of the way, toward the rear of the restaurant, which suits me just fine. Elias looks perfectly acceptable and well-presented in his suit, but I feel a little underdressed for going out anywhere nice. I know I'm being paranoid. It's upscale but not *that* fancy.

Then there's Caelan, casual as anything in his fitted black T-shirt and ripped jeans, and I can already see his lips turning up into a sneer as he glances over at some of the other patrons.

"Please don't stab anyone," I murmur to him. Joking. Mostly.

He snorts a quiet laugh, some of the tension bleeding out of him. "What, you don't wanna see that?"

"As hot as you look covered in blood..." Because I've seen that in videos several times. "No. I'd like to eat first."

"I like the implication you'd be fine with it *after* we've eaten." He grins.

I raise a sardonic eyebrow at him, fighting back an answering smile, but otherwise, don't reply. I think I'd rather stay living in denial a little longer. I know they can't exactly be good people, but casually discussing murder with Caelan, or grievous bodily harm at best, doesn't bode well for my own moral state either.

I'm joking. He probably isn't. And yet, that doesn't bother me nearly as much as it should.

Organizing the seating arrangements and menus distracts me from that concern, at least. I end up in the middle, with Caelan and Elias on either side of me.

My fingers fidget with the tablecloth. If I was nervous before, the

butterflies in my stomach are even worse now. Before, meeting them was purely down to chance. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or the right place at the right time. But either way, it wasn't *serious*.

But now I'm on an actual, honest-to-God *date* with them. At a restaurant nice enough to be beyond the price range I'd ever look at for myself. This is a lot more intentional than accidentally running into Caelan's knife.

When was the last time I went on a date? I don't remember what I'm supposed to do. It feels like there's this weird pressure about it all of a sudden. I want to go back to sitting in the car, teasing each other, and maybe having Caelan grope me some more.

Elias must notice the way I've quieted and withdrawn because he takes my hand in his and leans over. "Don't be intimidated by the location," he murmurs, low and reassuring. "Nothing has changed."

He's right. Nothing has changed, really. I don't need to act any differently. I'm worrying too much about their and other people's perceptions now that we're out in public.

We order our food. Elias orders wine for himself and me, while Caelan passes on that in favor of straight whiskey, which does not surprise me in the slightest. And we just talk.

I'm desperately curious to know more about them. How can I not be? They're goddamn *demons*. How is that possible? What can they do? They mentioned they were stuck here, which only creates even more questions. Where do they come from, then? And how did they get trapped?

I understand it's probably not something they want to talk about with someone they've just met. Groupies don't get the emotional backstory, if that's what it even is. Yet it's still frustrating because they won't answer even the simplest questions. Even things I'm certain are innocent, like what they do for fun or for hobbies outside of the band, earn me bemused glances before they turn the conversation back around.

In a way, it makes sense. I *do* know them. Sort of. It's like what I realized

before in the car about being familiar with who they are through their songs and videos. Though that hardly counts.

But they know *nothing* about me. So, I get it when Elias twists my questions and asks me about myself instead. Yet, at the same time, I can't shake the thought of *why do they care*. They're otherworldly demons, spending one night with a random fan for their own gratification. What does it matter to them what sort of job I do, what my hobbies are, or that I'm about to start my final year of a master's degree next week?

I even ask them straight up. "Not that the attention isn't flattering," I reply to one of Elias' questions instead of giving an honest answer. "But how is this interesting to you in any way whatsoever?"

It's a genuine confusion.

"Told you," Caelan says. "Humans are fun. Beings like us... we don't exactly do family. Or have, like, pets and shit. We don't *get* mundane, stupid stories. Like, you ever spoken to a demon who had their pet goat piss on visitors from the balcony? That's so dumb but fuckin' hilarious."

I break into a fit of giggles at the mental image. Goats *do* have some association with Hell, after all. It's not implausible for a demon to have one as a pet.

Caelan raises his eyebrows, amused by the amount of humor I'm finding in his explanation. "You're cute."

"You're weird," I reply.

"You're the one here on a date with us."

"Never said it was a bad weird," I say with a shrug and wry smile. Caelan narrows his eyes and pokes me in the side in retribution. Not hard, just playful. Teasing.

I'm comfortable enough to be teasing a pair of goddamn demons.

And either they're talented actors, or they are genuinely invested in the conversation. Caelan is more interested in anecdotes. In the silly stories I have of things I've done and places I've traveled. There are a lot of those.

Elias, on the other hand, seems to care deeply about my hobbies and talents. They heard me singing back at the theater, which is still embarrassing. But he draws me into a conversation about that for a good forty minutes after getting me to admit the song he heard was one I'd written myself. Elias writes the majority of lyrics and melodies for the songs Goëtica produces, while Caelan oversees drums, guitars, and mixing, and it's fascinating to talk tech with them about it.

I feel so small. I mess around with it as a hobby, barely even that, while Elias is out there creating real and damn *good* songs, but it's never because of anything he says about it. He treats me as an equal throughout the whole thing. I splutter and raise my hands in protest when he asks me to sing more things I've written.

"I-I'm not good at singing *in front* of people. Besides, we'll disturb everyone else."

He accepts the latter part of that reasoning, for which I'm glad. I didn't want to have to acknowledge that a lot of the songs I've written, especially recently, may have been about or inspired by them.

By the time we've eaten and finished dessert, I realize I've spilled my soul to them. I haven't talked to anyone like this in so long.

It's an idiotic thing I've done, I realize, far too late. I've been rambling away like a stalker's wet dream. I shared so much information, barely thinking about it. Where I go to college, my workplace, enough about the area I live—they could probably track it down in a heartbeat if they wanted to.

Yet somehow, it doesn't bother me as much as it should. I shouldn't be *comfortable* with them. With a pair of demons. I can't forget that, just because they've been nice to me. All the same, it's freeing, in a way. To know up front, this is what they are. This is the game we're playing. They're not pretending to be anything else.

There will be consequences if I get too close. I've accepted that and feel

oddly at ease with it.

I've had two glasses of wine. Maybe that doesn't help. I'll admit I don't know the first thing about wines or what type this is, but whatever Elias picked out is good. I feel pleasantly warm. A little buzzed. Although I'm not sure how much is from the wine and how much is from just being in their company.

Caelan's hand has been on my thigh beneath the table for a while, and, between courses, Elias shifted his chair closer so that I could lean into him. His fingers are in my hair, casually playing with the strands.

I really want nothing more in the world than to lean up and kiss him.

"Elias," I start. I don't think I'm quite bold enough to kiss him outright, not in public, but I turn my head and sigh into the crook of his neck.

"Are you enjoying your date, darling?" Elias asks, sounding quietly amused by how affectionate I'm being.

"Yeah." Again, not the most eloquent answer, but I mean it entirely sincerely. The food was good, and the wine was better. And the company. If I hadn't already had a crush on Caelan and Elias, I would've been falling *hard*.

I adore Caelan's teasing and cackling laugh. The electric crackles sneak back in the more shots of whiskey he takes. And Elias' dry, deadpan sense of humor and that low voice that does things to me every time he leans over to murmur some wry comment to me.

Dammit. There's no way I can even try to deny it. I'm so into them.

Elias is holding me against him, and Caelan is stroking my thigh, and even that much teasing affection is making me want to squirm in place.

"Please, just kiss me," I finally blurt out. I feel Elias' deep chuckle of response more than I hear it.

Elias obliges, though. He tilts my head back, then finally, *finally*, his lips press against mine. Slow and exploratory, he's taking the time to savor it. He still has his hand tangled in my hair, and his fingers massage my scalp in a way that makes me absolutely melt against him.

I part my lips, inviting him in, wanting him to deepen the kiss.

He laughs softly against me. “So eager,” he murmurs. Yet he does as I wish.

Caelan is getting restless at the lack of attention. I’m too preoccupied with Elias’ tongue in my mouth to notice—how can I notice anything else when he’s slowly tasting every inch of me and making my knees feel weak? But Caelan brings my thoughts back to him with his other hand, joining the first on my thighs and sliding them up even higher. He grips my hips, thumbs rubbing small circles over my hipbones, and he leans in to nip at my exposed throat.

I gasp, the sound muffled by Elias’ mouth. Caelan isn’t biting down *hard*, yet the threat of his too-sharp teeth against my pulse point sends a thrill through me.

This is getting overly heated for a public place. But it’s impossible to want to stop when Elias’ lips are working against mine in the most delicious ways, and Caelan is leaving stinging bites all along the column of my throat. Even if I could have gotten away with such a public display of affection with one of them, being sandwiched between both is far too daring.

I reluctantly draw away, sighing.

“Do you want to stop?” Elias asks.

“No! No. But, um... people are going to stare.”

“Who gives a fuck about them?” Caelan says. His hands slide lower to grope my ass, and I let out an undignified squeak of surprise.

“*Caelan.*”

“They can’t see that.” He smirks.

He’s technically not wrong. They can probably see my face flushing bright red, though.

Elias does absolutely nothing to rein Caelan in, amused by the other demon’s antics. It’s not like Elias doesn’t have an arm wrapped around me himself that he’s decidedly not removing.

“Perhaps we should get the check before Caelan causes a scene,” he suggests.

“Pfft. Like you’re not the one who started making moves on her first.”

“She asked me to.”

Caelan’s eyes fall on me. “So that makes *you* the troublemaker, not me.”

“Hey,” I protest. Them ganging up on me is not fair.

“Should’ve figured after that stunt in the car.” Caelan grins. Then he leans in to purr lowly against my ear, “The troublemakers are always so much more *fun*.”

His words send a shiver through me. There’s something undeniably sensual in his tone, and it makes my eyelids flutter shut for a moment.

Maybe Caelan has a point. Who cares who’s watching?

It’s not like there are even that many people left anyway. I don’t know when it got so late. I barely noticed the time passing so quickly, caught up in talking and laughing with them. It must be close to the restaurant’s closing time. Only two or three tables are occupied in the entire place, and we’re out of the way. No one’s paying attention.

I can’t resist it any longer, and maybe I’m only proving Caelan’s point. But I brace a hand on the back of his neck and kiss him.

Caelan growls against my lips. Then he’s kissing me back with an intensity that leaves me breathless. He doesn’t show any of Elias’ restraint, immediately prying my lips open and sliding his tongue into my mouth. His grip on me only grows tighter, pulling me against him. The kiss is firm and insistent, and the things he’s doing with his tongue make heat curl in my gut. I shouldn’t be getting so turned on by a kiss in public, but *damn*.

“Really. Do you have no sense of decorum?” Elias sighs, but he doesn’t sound overly upset with either of us. In fact, both of his hands find my waist as well, stroking up and down my sides. He’s not doing anything to stop this in the slightest.

Caelan pulls away long enough to growl at Elias. “Pay the fuckin’ bill

and let's get out of here.”

I can only assume Elias does so because Caelan returns to kissing me and doesn't stop. He pulls me over onto his chair, and I'm straddled across his lap by the time Elias interrupts to say we're ready to leave.

Oh. Right. Leaving. That's a thing we're meant to be doing.

My face is flushed and eyes glassy, lips pink and kiss-swollen by the time Caelan finally lets go. He smirks at my dazed expression.

“You're so damn cute,” he reiterates.

The three of us head to the exit, and I duck my head as we walk past the last few remaining patrons, hoping they weren't paying attention to what was going on in our corner.

It's dark outside. The dead of night, and there isn't a soul around. Elias and Caelan shed their human glammers, and it makes me smile to see them back to their more demonic forms. I can't even explain why to myself, but honestly, somehow, they're even more attractive like this. There's not *much* difference in looks, but perhaps it's something more about their demeanor, their power, and the thrill of danger.

There's something dangerous in Elias' eyes. I only notice it as we reach the car and I turn to face him. He immediately pins me up against the door, and I gasp in surprise as his mouth latches onto my throat.

“Did you really think you were going to get away with that display back there?” he asks, voice deep and rough, and *dammit*. His voice is really, really fucking hot. Heat pools in my gut, having him talk to me like that.

“I...”

“Now it's my turn.”

I moan helplessly into Elias' mouth as he kisses me every bit as roughly as Caelan had. Now that there's no one watching and no façade of propriety to maintain, he doesn't bother holding back. He has me pinned in place while we make out, and it's—

God, it's hot.

It's a good thing he has me pinned in place because my knees are decidedly shaky. Every swipe of his tongue against my lips, inside my mouth, sends white-hot arousal flooding through me. His body is pressed up against mine, and I want to—fuck, I want to grind against him. He has me feeling so damn needy, and I'm desperate to get some stimulation.

He pulls away the moment I roll my hips against his, and I whimper in disappointment.

Elias gives me a thoroughly wicked smirk, then turns the look on Caelan as well. "You two are not going to touch each other in the car. At all. I have had quite enough of your teasing."

"C'mon, seriously?" Caelan protests.

I would protest as well if I could remember how to speak, but that goddamn commanding tone of Elias' has kind of melted my brain.

He opens the door for me, and I get into the car. Still shaky, panting, and turned on. Just, damn.

"Shannon, where are you staying?" Elias asks, and it takes my overheated brain a moment to register he's talking to me. Then, it takes another moment to remember the answer to that question.

I grimace as I realize. "It's... a hostel. Shared dorm."

"Dammit." Caelan curses so emphatically that I laugh a little. It is an understandable sentiment, though.

"Are you comfortable sharing a space with strangers like that?" Elias says with a small frown.

"It's not that bad." I shrug. "It's a female-only dorm. Not exactly my first choice, but it's cheaper. I can't afford a private room every time I go somewhere."

The sharing isn't the problem. It's more the fact I was, we all were, I imagine, very much hoping to go somewhere private and continue our time together, but we can't very well do that in a hostel.

"We'll pay for you to stay somewhere better tonight," Elias states.

Under normal circumstances, I'd at least *try* to reject an offer like that rather than let someone else pay for such unnecessary luxuries, but this is different. I'm pretty sure we're all on the same page, and we're all going to be able to benefit from getting a private room. So, I'm not about to complain.

"Thank you. That... would be nice."

Caelan snorts. He knows exactly what's up and finds the game of niceties Elias and I are playing to be hilarious.

"We'll head up toward Beverly Hills. There will be places to stay there."

I nod, though I'm not *that* familiar with LA since I've only visited a few times. I assume Elias knows what he's talking about. I do know that anywhere around that area is likely to be far more expensive than I'm comfortable with, but if Elias is willing to pay, I'm not going to stop him. Honestly, I'm too aroused now to protest over that. Besides, *what does money even matter to a demon?*

I can't stop my thoughts from rushing ahead, and it's not helping the situation at all. I squirm in my seat. I want them. God, I want them so fucking bad now. My mind is conjuring up images of taking them up to the hotel room with me and having them lay me out on the bed, their hands all over me as they strip my clothes away. Making out again as they reach down and *finally* press their fingers against my aching arousal and—

I moan softly, then hastily cover my mouth with the back of my hand. *Shit.* I'm letting my imagination get far too carried away. It feels almost presumptuous to think they'd even want to give me that level of attention. I'm nobody to them.

Just another fan. A groupie to toy with for the night.

But Caelan is watching me, luridly yellow-green eyes glowing in the darkness, and a hunger in his expression makes my heart skip. He's obeying Elias' order not to touch for the time being, but it looks like it's paining him greatly to do so.

He... he wants me, doesn't he?

I'm just a human to two demons, yet they've spent the entire evening with me so far of their volition. They didn't need to take me out for dinner or spend so long talking first if all they wanted was a quick fuck. I can almost believe they even enjoyed it, the three of us spending time together. And with Caelan looking at me like *that*.

I meet his gaze, and he leans in. Not touching, but close enough that our noses are almost grazing against each other, and his breath is hot against my lips.

"Such a pretty little thing," he murmurs to me. "I can't wait to make you *scream*."

My breath catches, arousal pulsing through me at the words alone. I take a moment to remember how to speak. "I hope that's a promise," I say, and Caelan's face splits into a wicked grin.

"Oh, doll, you have *no* idea."

God. The drive can't be over quick enough.

I sigh almost audibly in relief when Elias pulls into a hotel parking lot and leads me in. The place is fancy—far too fancy—but I don't care. I let him do all the talking, smoothly inquiring about room availability with the receptionist, while I hang back in the lobby and try to pretend I'm not aching with need.

Elias smiles as he returns, elegantly flourishing a key card and offering it to me. "Shall we escort you up?" he asks, and I nod.

Like we don't all know exactly where this is going.

The second we get into the room, Caelan closes and locks the door behind us, and I brace my hands on Elias' chest and kiss him again. I don't even bother looking around. I don't give a shit about the room. From the first brief glimpse, the place looks nice, but Elias naked and pinning me to the bed would look so much nicer.

"Stay with me tonight. Please," I beg them quietly.

"Do you want this?" Elias asks, and it's almost sweet that he cares that

much about checking I'm into it. As if it isn't utterly obvious.

“Yes. Fuck, yes. I want it so much.”

That expression is back in Elias' eyes, the one that looks like pure lust, and it makes my knees weak all over again. He guides me backward toward the bed until my thighs hit the back of it. Then I wrap my arms around his shoulders as he kisses me.

Helpless beneath the guidance of his lips and hands, I sigh as Elias lays me down against the covers.

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Chapter Four

O kay.

Oh, God.

This is happening.

Elias' mouth is insistent against mine, and he doesn't let up until he has kissed me breathless. Only once I'm panting for him does he finally draw back with a smirk.

"Get undressed," he murmurs.

I prop myself onto my elbows, then lean over to kick off my boots, fingers fumbling with the laces. Of course, I had to pick the most awkward things to wear today. My jeans are unwieldy as well. Elias rests his hands on either side of my thighs, only watching with a heated smirk as I undo them and slide them off.

I really wasn't expecting to get laid tonight, so all I have beneath is plain black cotton underwear. Nothing fancy. But I'm down to only my top and panties now, which looks good enough. I'll mourn the missed opportunity to wear some nice lingerie for them later.

The bed dips as Caelan joins me. He's only taken his combat boots off and nothing else so far, but he settles at the head of the bed and gestures for me to come to him. I obligingly crawl across the covers, and he grips my hips and pulls me to him the moment I'm within reach.

“Mmm, Caelan,” I protest mildly. His mouth is immediately on my throat again, his kisses as much teeth as lips, and he’s gonna leave hickeys at this rate, but I’m pretty sure that is exactly his intention.

To mark me.

Hot.

It’ll be a pain to cover up tomorrow, but, despite that, I don’t think I mind.

He turns me around so I can settle between his legs, back pressed against his chest. I realize why when Elias joins us, and I find myself sandwiched between the two of them. Elias reaches up to cup my face, thumb stroking gently over my cheek. Specifically, over the cut marring it.

“I apologize that you were injured earlier,” Elias says.

“Worth it.” *So fucking worth it.*

Caelan snorts from behind me. “You missed the bit where she admitted she was into that shit anyway.”

Elias raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

I can feel myself flushing. “Traitor,” I mutter, lightly elbowing Caelan behind me. He only laughs, then slides his hands beneath my top. I have to bite back a quiet moan as his hands find my breasts again.

Any further thoughts are quickly wiped from my mind. Caelan has his hands on me, teasing my nipples at the same time as he litters bruising nips and love bites across the back of my neck and shoulders. And Elias—Elias captures my lips again, in the same sort of kiss we shared back at the car. Heated, demanding. Not *rough*, as such, just intense. He dominates me easily, and all I can do is moan and squirm beneath him. Although squirming just ends up making me grind against Caelan—accidentally, I swear—and Caelan growls and bites down harder.

I gasp at the shock of pleasure-pain. “Ahh!”

The hardness of his erection presses into the small of my back. Heat pulses through me to feel it, and, oh *fuck*, yeah. The second time grinding

against him is much more intentional. *I want that.* Want his cock. In me.

Caelan's laugh is rough with arousal. One of his hands slides down, over my stomach, between my legs, rubbing against me through my soaked underwear. I whimper, hips rolling into the contact.

"So wet already," Caelan purrs. "This all for us, doll?"

"Y-yes," I admit.

I want them so badly it's like a physical ache between my legs. And it's not *just* sexual attraction, although there is certainly an awful lot of that too. They're hot as all hell, and God, the things they do to me.

But it's more. The evening I've spent with them has only made my crush on them infinitely worse. It's only meant to be a one-night stand. I don't know how I let my heart get involved. I *know* it is not going to end well. Yet a part of me is starting to care for them, and they seem to care about me to some degree. Enough to wine and dine me before taking me to bed, at least. I've grown comfortable around them. And, stupid as it may be, I trust them.

That makes everything else even more of a turn on.

It doesn't seem fair that I'm the only one partially dressed, and there's far too much clothing in the way for what I want. So I reach up and start undoing the buttons on Elias' shirt. A little clumsily, since it's kind of hard to focus when he slides his tongue back into my mouth again, but with clear intent.

I can feel his lips curve up into a smirk against mine.

"Allow me," Elias offers, leaning back. He undoes the rest of the buttons himself and strips his shirt off. It's not like he's even trying to make a show of it or anything, but damn. He looks good, so good—the broad shoulders, the way the veins stand out slightly along his forearms, the muscled definition of his abdominals and obliques, the lines of his hipbones leading down to the waistband of his trousers. He's breathtaking.

I want my mouth on him, is my first thought. My second thought reminds me there's absolutely nothing stopping me from doing exactly that.

I lean in and kiss him briefly yet hotly. Then I let my mouth trail over

him, his neck, along his collarbones, down his chest and stomach. I can't resist touching him too, and Elias makes a low noise of approval. I don't stop my descent until my hands are on his thighs and my mouth presses against the hard bulge straining at the fabric of his trousers, heart in my throat.

"Can I?"

Elias laughs. As if he would turn down an offer like that. "Of course, darling." He helps, undoing his fly and lifting his hips as I drag the fabric of his trousers and boxers together down his thighs.

Then I'm face to face with Elias' cock, and a shiver that's pure lust flashes through me. He's only half-hard, but even that much will be a mouthful.

God. I want it so much.

I brace myself against his thighs and lean in to press soft, open-mouthed kisses along his length, curling my tongue around him once I reach the head. He buries his hand into my hair, fingers twitching as I tighten my lips around him and slowly sink down.

Elias gives a little hum of pleasure. And, damn, that sound is hot. But it'd be even sexier to hear him groan.

I lose myself in it, doing everything I can to please him. It's been a long time since I've been with anyone, and I know I can't be that good at this, technique-wise. But fuck, I can at least try to make up for it with enthusiasm. It's the headiest, most arousing feeling—the heavy weight of his cock in my mouth, the thickness of it, the appreciative noises he makes when I moan quietly around him.

"God, don't you just make a pretty sight." Caelan sighs, running his clawed fingers along my spine, and I shiver and gasp, arching into the contact.

There's only so long that Caelan's patience will last before he wants in on the action as well.

I let out an emphatic groan around Elias' cock as Caelan's hand migrates

between my legs again. This time his fingers sneak beneath my underwear, pressing against my soaked entrance. Rubbing in small, suggestive little circles and *fuck*, I need something inside me. As soon as possible.

I come up for air, lips reddened and slick with saliva. Ready to beg for them, but words fail me as I look up and realize that Caelan and Elias are already preoccupied with each other, their mouths firmly entwined. The kiss is far more violent than any they've given me, more antagonistic, but from the expression on Caelan's face—lust, pain, and pure absolute enjoyment—that's the way he likes it.

"Oh," is all I can say, voice catching.

Elias notices that I've stopped and wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me up to sit in his lap, even as he's still making out with Caelan. His cock is pressing against me through the fabric of my underwear, and the heat is almost unbearable. I'm going to burn up if I don't get some relief soon.

"*Please*," I beg, needy and desperate, grinding down against Elias.

That gets Elias' attention enough to pull him away from Caelan for a moment. Shooting me a wicked look, he purposefully rolls his hips up to meet me. "Oh? Did you want this, darling?"

"Ugh! Fuck me, please. I need it in me so bad."

Caelan makes a disgruntled noise of protest as Elias shoves him away, but he's not overly upset. His eyes are glued to us as Elias lays me down on my back. Elias hooks his fingers into my underwear and strips me from the waist down, and Caelan aids by yanking my top off. Elias pushes his trousers off the rest of the way as well, and then we're both naked. There's such an intense hunger in his eyes as he looks down at me that it makes my heart flutter, my core aching even more.

"Dammit," Elias curses lowly. "We need protection..." he begins, trailing off as though thoroughly distracted by the sight of me laid out beneath him. It's flattering, the way he looks at me. Even if this is just temporary, it feels like they *want* me, that the attraction is genuine.

Caelan snorts. “Yeah, yeah. Gotcha covered. Least one of us figured we’d need this shit.” He pulls a condom out of his pocket—one of quite a few from the looks of it. Then he flicks it into Elias’ face, and I can’t help but giggle at Elias’ expression. “I’m not just a pretty face, you know.”

“Not even a pretty face,” Elias mutters as he retrieves the packet, tearing it open.

“That’s not what you said when it was buried in your ass. Just sayin’.”

And *that* snippet of information sure conjures up some mental images. I’m not sure whether to grin or moan at their banter because, *damn*, the two of them together...

I don’t have time to worry about it either way. Elias rolls the condom on with practiced ease then he’s back on me again. My knees frame his hips as he settles between my legs, and he leans over, pinning me down with his weight in a way that thrills me to the core. He kisses me and I arch up against him.

“Do it.” I breathe. “Elias, I-I want you.”

“If you insist.” He purrs, then his cock is pressing into me.

My head falls back, a deep, trembling moan escaping my parted lips. He’s *big*. Not too long but *thick*, I clench around him as he slowly sinks into me, stretching me open. I’m so turned on, so needy, and so ready for it that it doesn’t hurt at all, despite his size. It is so fucking amazing.

“O-oh, *fuck*.” I pant.

He kisses me again, oddly tender, once he’s settled all the way inside. “Shannon,” he murmurs, and it makes the hairs on my neck stand on end to realize someone like Elias is saying *my* name in bed. “All right?” he asks.

“Y-yeah. It’s good. *So* good.”

Caelan laughs, sprawling beside the two of us and stripping himself of his clothing. He makes no disguise of the way his eyes roam hungrily over the picture Elias and I make joined like this. I never thought I’d be into exhibitionism, but I must admit, it really is thrilling to have him watching us.

“You like the way Elias fills you up, doll?” Caelan purrs.

My attempt to answer is immediately lost as Elias starts moving, and the only reply I can formulate is a needy whine.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and lock my ankles together behind his back. Elias takes it slowly at first, making sure he doesn't hurt me. But he speeds up once it's clear from my moans and vaguely coherent murmurs of encouragement that I'm very much into it. A little faster, a little harder, and fuck, yes. This is what I need.

Caelan grabs my face and turns it toward him, pulling me into a kiss, making out with me while Elias fucks me. Caelan's teeth tug at my lip, and Elias' cock strokes inside me in the most blissfully pleasurable ways, and I can feel my legs starting to tremble. The heat is building and building until it threatens to overwhelm me.

I cling even tighter to Elias, fingers digging into his back. “Please! More, I'm close, feels so good, Elias, I...”

His breaths are coming heavily, little grunts and groans every time he thrusts into me. “You take it so well, don't you?” he murmurs, lips brushing against the shell of my ear. “Such a good girl for me.”

The praise in that goddamn deep, layered voice is enough to make my eyes flutter shut. He's staying in deeper now, not pulling out all the way but taking me in short, shallow thrusts, grinding his cock inside me right where I need it, and *God*. Elias has to know exactly what he's doing to me because he's smirking as he turns me into a mewling, writhing mess.

“E-Elias!” I whimper.

“That's. It,” he growls out, punctuating each word with another powerful thrust into me. “Come for me, darling. I want to feel you.”

Fuck. How can I *not* when he says it like that?

It only takes a few more strokes of his cock before I'm gasping, crying out his name in pleasure as an orgasm shudders through me. I cling to him, my thighs trembling and my core clenching down around him.

Elias curses low and rough beneath his breath, still thrusting into me, but erratically now. Then he stills, his cock twitching inside me. I pull him down, kissing him fiercely, breathlessly, as we ride out our orgasms together.

“That was... so good.” I pant, a blissed-out grin on my face and eyes half-closed as I lay here with my limbs tangled with his.

An amused huff interrupts us. “Hey, Shannon. Don’t think you’re done yet.”

Caelan. Oh.

I’d been so into being with Elias that I’d almost forgotten Caelan was here too.

Another shiver of arousal runs through me. I’ve only just come, but at the same time, I’m still so turned on, aftershocks of pleasure curling heatedly through my gut, and Caelan is *staring* at me, practically drooling, eyes alight with hunger as he strokes himself. His cock is hard and flushed. Caelan’s patience is clearly running thin—he’s already taken the liberty of rolling a condom on, ready for me.

“Come here,” Caelan commands, the words warping slightly with the crackle of his power. Maybe that should be worrisome because I can tell he’s close to losing control. But the idea thrills me as much as it scares me, and honestly, I have no intention of making him wait anyway.

Still suspended in a state of heady lust, I crawl to him. He’s leaned back against the pillows at the headboard, and he grabs hold of me, pulling me into his lap like he did at the start of all this. Only this time, there’s no clothing between us, and the hot, hard length of his cock sits directly against my slick entrance.

“You gonna ride me?” he asks.

My voice is too choked up with breathless, needy arousal to answer him, but I nod enthusiastically and lift myself to my knees, letting him line himself up. The head of his cock presses into me slightly before pulling back again, teasing, and I whine.

But he's too worked up to tease much, which suits me fine. We both moan as I sink onto him, letting his cock fill me all the way, and the position is perfect for him to bury as deep into me as he can.

God, yes.

"Fuck," Caelan groans out. "You're so hot and tight still."

I manage a breathless laugh. "What, were you expecting Elias to have stretched me out that much?"

He grunts, jerking his hips up into me in retribution for being mouthy, and I groan in delight. "I've had that dick in my ass before, and frankly, it wouldn't surprise me."

"I *think* I should be complimented," Elias comments wryly.

"Yeah, yeah, you're a huge prick. In multiple senses."

I giggle. I love it when they snark at each other. It's oddly sweet.

Then Caelan grips my hips and lifts me, and a gasp of pleasure overrides my amusement. He's fucking *strong*. Of course, he would be. They're demons. Caelan doesn't have the same visible bulk as Elias does. His build is leaner and wirily muscular, though no less powerful. He lifts my entire body weight like it's nothing.

The show of strength, the knowledge of how easily he could utterly overpower me, is such a fucking turn on. I cry out as he pulls me roughly back down onto his cock, burying himself to the hilt.

"Caelan!"

"Didn't I tell you I was gonna make you scream?"

"Mmm." I moan and rock back, shifting the angle of my hips as Caelan repeats the action, so this time, when his cock slams into me at the perfect angle, I *do* scream.

My hand immediately flies up to cover my mouth. Shit. I can't be that loud. We're still in a hotel, and even though it's a nice place and the walls hopefully aren't *that* thin, I don't know how the sound will travel.

"C-Caelan, *please*."

He grins, shooting a heated, heavy-lidded look at me. He doesn't stop me from attempting to muffle my noises, but he doesn't stop fucking me, either. And I *love* it, love the way he's manhandling me so easily, sharp nails digging bruising crescents into my hips as he bounces me roughly on his cock.

He thrusts up at the same time as he drags me down, and all I can do is cling to his shoulders and moan helplessly as sharp spikes of pleasure sear through my veins.

Caelan's hand tangles into my hair, cradling the back of my head, holding me against him while he fucks me. His mouth presses against my throat, nipping and sucking at the flesh there. If he hasn't already, this time will definitely leave hickeys.

Marking me as his.

Theirs.

Dammit. I enjoy the idea of that so much more than I should.

He picks up the pace, thrusting hard as he chases his release. He's been on edge for a while, stroking himself while watching Elias and me this whole time, and it doesn't take much more for his hips to stutter to a stop, groaning emphatically. He comes buried inside me, and I squirm in his grip with heat flushing my face a brilliant red.

"Caelan," I beg. "I need... a little more. *Please*. I'm close again. I just..."

"I gotcha, doll," Caelan growls. He picks me up and tosses me down onto the bed, and I let out a noise that's something between a yelp and a laugh. It turns into a moan as Caelan parts my thighs, and his head is between my legs.

"Oh, *fuck*," I blurt out.

I have a brief moment to glimpse his tongue, which is a little too long and pointed to look human before it presses into me. Then I forget how to breathe.

The only sound I can make is a high, keening sob as his tongue strokes me from the inside. Maybe it's because I'm so close already, but the pleasure

feels almost *too* good, like it's going to drive me out of my mind. The way he fucks me with his tongue, alternating between deeply, skillfully eating me out and withdrawing to place kitten licks all over me, curling his tongue against my clit and lightly sucking just so. "Oh, God, fuck, *Caelan!*"

I must be writhing too much. I can't help it. Caelan growls at me and grips my hips to pin them down, leaving me utterly at his mercy. Then Elias takes my wrists and pins them above my head.

"Caelan is very good with his tongue," Elias murmurs as if I'm not *very* aware of that right now. He leans over and kisses me, swallowing my moans as my second orgasm of the night washes over me.

My mind feels so blurred with pleasure. They're both holding me down as I squirm against the covers, the heat of it flooding through me in trembling waves, and Caelan isn't *stopping*.

He keeps tongue fucking me throughout my orgasm, not even giving me a chance to come back down before I can feel the pressure building again. Instead of just little aftershocks, I can feel it rapidly escalating into another full release.

Fuck.

Caelan continues his onslaught of skill with his tongue while Elias devours my mouth. They have their hands all over me in heavy, possessive caresses against my overheated skin. I surrender to it, to them. I let sensation overwhelm me, my voice cracking between a sob and a scream as I come again.

I'm trembling so much, clenching and twitching as the pleasure sears through my veins. Elias holds me through it, and Caelan pulls back to place his kisses on the inside of my thighs. Still sensitive, but not overstimulating in the same blissfully awful way. I moan their names, and Elias murmurs mine while brushing his lips across the side of my neck.

Caelan pulls back and licks his lips clean, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He smiles the smuggest, thoroughly satisfied smirk. "That's

twice,” he preens. “I made her come more.”

“This isn’t a competition, Caelan.”

“Says the one who’s losing.”

I laugh weakly, completely blissed out and breathless. “All right, you’re both good,” I say firmly, hoping to cut off any potential argument in the bud. My voice rapidly turns dreamier. “That was... *so good.*”

“I’m glad you had fun,” Elias says, kissing me gently again.

For the time being, I’m more than content to lay like this, with the two of them on either side of me, letting my heartbeat and breathing even out. Just exchanging soft kisses and tender touches, I haven’t even had much time to explore them yet, so I grasp the opportunity. Tracing fingertips over Caelan’s hips—he has such nice hips—and following the thick line of his treasure trail. He has much more body hair than Elias, dusted across his chest and thighs, and the contrast is fascinating.

He has a lot of scars. Big ones, remnants of deep slashes across his arms, stomach, chest, and throat. I am curious, but it seems too personal to ask about them.

They explore me in return too. Soft at first, even Caelan seems to be simply reveling in the simple, pleasurable contact for the time being. I wonder if it’s because of what he said before about humans being fun. Maybe because we must be so different from other demons or whatever Caelan and Elias used to associate with, I can’t imagine them ever being anything close to affectionate in that sort of scenario.

In a way, it’s messed up to think about. But I don’t want to get caught up in speculations about *what* they are, the nature of beings like that, not now of all times.

Besides, it’s not long before we end up getting thoroughly distracted again, their touches slowly sliding over my thighs, hips, and waist, and the way Elias gently cups my breasts. Those touches soon start turning less than innocent again, and I giggle.

Honestly, I couldn't really expect them to behave for long. They probably have a lot more stamina than humans. And I've had enough of a breather that feeling Elias growing hard again behind me, his arousal pressing into the small of my back, makes a renewed interest curl in my gut as well.

I end up making out with Caelan, his cock already sheathed in anticipation, hot and heavy in my hand as I stroke him. Elias acquires another condom at some point and shifts to settle between my legs, lifting one over his shoulder so he can straddle my thigh and take me on my side just like that. Fucking into me until I'm a mess all over again, moaning his name in a desperate, helpless litany.

And once he's done with me, Caelan flips me over and takes me from behind *while* I'm laid on top of Elias, and *goddamn*. It's fucking hot. Being held between the two of them, filled and fucked over and over and over.

They have me reduced to broken moans and shaky screams, begging for them in a voice that's absolutely wrecked by the time they drag my fifth damn orgasm of the night out of me.

Nothing exists, hasn't existed for a while, apart from the sheer, overwhelming pleasure. I collapse to the side, utterly limp and boneless with satisfaction. Still trembling and gasping, my eyes glassy, heart pounding in my ears.

A part of me is vaguely aware Caelan hasn't come yet, and Elias is getting hard again beneath the onslaught, but I can't. I'm exhausted. The evening has been intense beyond measure, dirty, and delicious. I've loved every second, but I can't take anymore, and they can tell.

Caelan bears down on Elias, and then it's the two of them pressed together instead.

Oh.

I blink slowly, unable to tear my gaze away. Maybe now I understand why they enjoyed watching each other take turns with me because it sure is something to see. To watch the way Caelan's hips roll as he grinds against

Elias. Elias' hand wraps around both of their cocks together, stroking at a near-brutal pace. Their mouths lock into a needy, filthy kiss, all teeth and tongue.

Their muscles flex, the sheer power as they move against each other, and the *sounds*. They're close and louder for it. Elias' deep groans and the way Caelan growls into Elias' mouth.

I'm too worn out to get turned on again at this point, but there's no denying that it's probably the hottest thing I've seen in my life.

They hit their peaks together, and for the first time, I have about enough presence of mind left to appreciate the sight. The arch of Elias' back, the tightening of his jaw as his head falls back. The way Caelan's clawed fingers curl into the sheets until I'm worried he's going to tear them, the furrow in his eyebrows and an expression of almost pained pleasure on his face. Caelan's still wearing the condom he had on while fucking me, but Elias isn't wearing one, and he spills out over his hand and his and Caelan's stomachs.

They claw hungrily at each other for a moment longer, cocks rubbing against each other as they ride out the aftershocks. Then Caelan groans and lets his weight flop down on top of Elias, and Elias grunts, shoving him off.

Caelan ends up sprawled on the bed right next to me, and I grin as I curl against his side. "You guys are sexy as hell together," I comment languidly, resting my head against his shoulder.

Caelan huffs a short laugh. "Glad you enjoyed the show."

"Like you weren't getting off on watching Elias fuck me. *Twice*," I retort, sticking my tongue out at him. He captures my mouth in a kiss, and I squeak in surprise. It's lazy, and a little messy because of how tired he is, but it's nice.

That is an understatement. The whole evening has been incredible.

For the time being, I'm more than content to lay in Caelan's arms, letting him kiss me while my fingers trail over the scars marring his tanned skin as I come down from the high of some of the best sex I've had in my life.

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Chapter Five

I'm startled out of my reverie a little while later by Elias' fingers trailing lightly down my spine, announcing his presence. I hadn't even realized he'd left, too busy being affectionate with Caelan. Paying attention now, I notice I can hear running water.

"There's a bath for you," Elias says. "If you would like."

Mmm. I would definitely like.

I'm a mess of sweat, saliva, and my own slick all over my stomach and thighs, sore and still trembling ever so slightly.

A bath sounds heavenly.

I reluctantly untangle myself from Caelan and roll over to slide off the edge of the bed. I wasn't even aware of how much my muscles had been overworked until trying to stand. My legs feel about ready to give way under me. I stumble, and Elias catches me with an arm around my waist.

"I'm okay," I mumble in response to the question I'm certain would otherwise be coming, and Elias chuckles.

"Perhaps one of us should accompany you."

I don't feel like I *need* accompaniment. I need a moment for my head to stop spinning and my knees to stop feeling so weak but sharing a bath with Elias or Caelan? I am so down for that.

Elias grabs Caelan's ankle and tugs him over. "Bath," he commands

when Caelan grouches about being manhandled. “At the very least, get up. I’m going to change the sheets.”

“Why?” Caelan complains with a yawn.

“Because, unlike you and your tolerance for filth, I find it more comfortable not to sleep in wet patches.”

I laugh but also blush. Because most of those wet patches would be from me since the two of them used condoms every time they came. Except for Elias, that last time grinding against Caelan, but I’m pretty sure none of that ended up on the bed.

Despite his half-hearted protests, Caelan perks up when he looks my way, running an appreciative look down my naked form. He purrs, grinning at me with a look that’s heated and teasing, and takes me from Elias with a grip on my hips. “Suppose I can be convinced,” he murmurs.

The flattery makes me grin, but, despite his leering, Caelan is well-behaved as we head to the bathroom.

Damn, I forgot this place was a kind of fancy.

It’s an actual *bath*, easily big enough for both of us, nestled in a large alcove, taking up most of the room. It’s mostly full now, so Caelan turns off the taps, and I step in to sink into the water.

I can’t help the quiet moan that escapes my lips. The warm water feels so good, relaxing muscles I hadn’t even realized I’d been using. If it weren’t for Caelan being there too, I probably would’ve fallen asleep in moments. As it is, I melt boneless against him.

Caelan takes my hands in his, at first exploring them, tangling our fingers together. He turns over my palms, and with the heat from exertion and warmth of the water, the veins have risen close enough to the skin’s surface to be visible, faint blue lines that Caelan traces with the tip of his fingernails—following the lines across my palm and down my wrists.

He shifts behind me, growling softly. “You’d look so gorgeous with your veins sliced open and bleeding for me.”

That statement makes the hairs on the back of my neck rise. “Caelan?”

“What you’d look like squirming beneath my knife...”

“Um.” The first hints of anxiety flutter in my chest, and I have to know. “Is this a you-want-to-murder-me thing or fun-kinky-knife-play thing?”

Caelan blinks at me for a moment, then snorts an inelegant laugh. “Aww. Knife play, doll. I wanna ruin you, but not to the point of breaking. You wouldn’t be any fun to play with that way.”

I’m oddly fine with taking his word for it. “Okay. In that case... I’m listening.”

“Yeah?” He grins. His hands sink lower, beneath the water now, but he only holds my waist, rubbing circles with his fingertips. “I can play nice if I have to. Elias is right about one thing. There’s no point hurting the ones who are loyal to us. But you gotta know I’m a sadist at heart, baby.”

“Mmm...” I agree. I do know. At least, I’d assumed from the things I’ve seen in his videos, and maybe making assumptions about that sort of thing isn’t wise, but Caelan’s claim is far from a surprise. Perhaps that’s the best way to put it.

This conversation makes my heart rate pick up again. From interest or fear, I’m not so sure. Maybe a mix of both.

“Not all the time. But... it’s like an itch that’s gotta be scratched. And if I can’t, it makes things difficult to work out in any kind of long-term arrangement, you know?”

Wait—my brain stalls over that last part. Why is he talking about long-term arrangements? Is that a thing they even *do*? *Is he thinking, maybe...*

I can’t think about that. I can’t get my hopes up because I’m already playing with fire getting as attached as I have.

I turn my attention to the other implication behind his statement. “Are you asking if I’m okay with knife play?” I ask, trying to wrap my head around what’s even happening with this conversation.

Caelan’s only response is a lazy shrug.

It's already kind of come up before, but I suppose he wants clarification. I never actually *said* it. I turn over, still in his arms, so we end up chest to chest—face to face.

“I...” I take a breath. “I’m gonna be honest. I’ve never tried it. I don’t know for sure. But... I like the idea of it, in theory. Nothing too deep. But if you were to, um, just cut the surface layers of the skin enough to make it bleed or something. Maybe, tie me down and carve little patterns into my skin, shallow but deep enough to scar for a few weeks, and I... mmm. I’d like to give it a go sometime. Really like to.”

“Would you now?” He purrs.

“Yes,” I say, more confidently this time. I’ve kind of had a passing interest for a while now, and I know *exactly* when that curiosity started and who to blame for it, but it’s not something that I would ever seek out in everyday life. I’m not that stupid. Finding someone skilled enough to do it safely and who I trust enough to play with me like that is not going to happen soon. Not with any human.

But with Caelan...

“On one condition,” I add.

“What’s that?”

I hesitate. Maybe condition is too strong a word. It’s more of a request. And a weird one, now I think about it, but, well, if we’re discussing kinks anyway. “Could you hold the knife against my throat while you fuck me sometime?”

Caelan’s eyebrows raise, but his expression looks thoroughly delighted. “You kinky little *shit*,” he crows, and I blush.

“I’m not the one with the knife kink!”

“Except you kinda are, from what I’m hearing.” He grins.

I bury my face in the crook of his neck, hiding in embarrassment.

Caelan only purrs, still holding me close and running soft caresses up and down my sides. Soft, except for being able to feel his sharp nails trailing

across my skin in a way that makes me want to shiver. “Mm, I knew you were gonna be a fun one.”

“Shut up,” I mumble.

Caelan’s grip on me tightens, then I gasp as he flips our positions so I’m beneath him. The sudden movement sloshes water over the side of the bath, but I don’t think he cares. He kisses me hard and intensely.

“Oh.” I breathe when he finally lets me go.

Caelan grins. There’s something dangerous in the expression, and the way he looks so intent makes me think he’s already planning all the things he could do with me in the future. “We should get out before Elias thinks I drowned you or something,” he mutters eventually, like he’s trying to distract himself from his own thoughts.

I nod in agreement, not entirely trusting myself to speak.

Caelan helps me out of the bath, and I appreciate it. The warm water left me feeling even dizzy than when I stood before. I give up even trying to stay upright and let Caelan wrap a towel around me. *Damn, even the towels are nice, ridiculously soft and fluffy.* Then he scoops me up to carry me back to the bedroom.

He sets me down on the edge of the bed and dries himself off, then sprawls across the fresh covers like a lazy, contented cat, and I giggle.

Elias has been waiting for us and comes over, kissing the top of my head. “Feel better?” he asks.

“Yeah. A lot.”

I tilt my head up, and Elias chuckles, obligingly giving me a soft kiss on the lips as well.

“I’m going to clean up myself, and I’ll join you shortly. Don’t feel obliged to stay up if you need to rest. We worked you over quite thoroughly this evening.”

It’s tempting, *extremely* tempting. I’ve never felt such bone-deep, satisfied exhaustion in my life, and I know I’ll be gone the second I place my

head down on the pillow. Even remaining sitting upright is a challenge. But after my conversation with Caelan, I really want to talk to Elias too.

I still can't get that phrase he used out of my head. *Long-term arrangements*. What does that even mean? That he would bring it up at all?

Would they consider the possibility of this being more than a one-night stand?

Do they do that? Or was Caelan making a general statement?

Theoretically, if they did, how would that work? An arrangement between all three of us, or might one of them want to see me again but not the other? All three of us for a one-night stand, a bit of fun with a threesome like tonight, that's easy. But how would the dynamic work as an actual polyamorous relationship? If they even want a relationship at all. *I'm getting way too far ahead of myself*.

I'm still nothing more than a groupie to them. I can't forget that.

I'm curious, though. Does Elias have any deal-breakers, like the sadism thing seemed to be for Caelan?

If I can stay awake long enough, I'd like to at least talk.

There's no way I'm going to last if I stay on the bed, so I stand and head toward the window. Caelan gives me a passing look of curiosity as I leave.

"I'm going to wait up for Elias," I explain.

Caelan shrugs. "Suit yourself."

I tug the curtains open just a little. I'm still wrapped in only a towel, and although I don't think anyone would be able to see in, it's better to be safe than sorry. The glass doors lead to a balcony with a view down to the hotel's brightly lit pool below. Beyond that is a dark sky and the city lights of LA.

It hits me again how fucking surreal all of this is.

Being here.

Being with Caelan and Elias.

Having been *thoroughly fucked* by Caelan and Elias.

It seems too much to hope they'd want to keep me around for longer.

I'm too exhausted to stay standing for long, so I curl up on the sofa. Despite my intention of waiting, it's only moments before I find myself dozing.

Elias returns to find me like that, and he chuckles as he wraps an arm around my shoulders, clearly intending to carry me back to bed.

"I'm awake," I mumble sleepily, sounding quite the opposite.

"You didn't need to wait for me," he murmurs.

"I know. I wanted to."

"That's sweet, but unnecessary." He doesn't try to move me any further. Instead, he sits with me and holds me against him. He's wearing a towel wrapped around his waist and nothing else, and I take a moment to appreciate how good he looks shirtless. His hair is damp, falling over his face more than usual.

"I don't want this to be over," I say. That's an understatement. It feels like if I go to sleep, I'll wake to find this whole thing was a dream. I'm not so lucky to get attention like this. But then I wonder if admitting it sounds too needy, and quickly amend, "I had such a good time tonight."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," Elias says softly. Like he knows there's so much more I'm not saying—that I have so many more questions. And I *do*, but who the hell am I to be asking him if they'd consider keeping me around for another date together, at least?

"Mmm... Elias, I..." I trail off. I don't know what I want to say.

He cups my face, thumb brushing across the scabbed-over gash along my cheek. His lips twitch up into a wry smile. "I'm glad Caelan didn't scare you away."

I give him a smile in return. "What, with the weird knife thing? We, uh, talked about that in the bath. I'm okay with it."

"Hmm. I wasn't sure if you were just putting on a brave face for him after he cut you."

I laugh outright at that. "No. Definitely not." I take a moment to gather

my thoughts. *How does anyone ever ask about this shit without it being awkward?* “He mentioned it was kind of a deal-breaker for him, though, for more long-term stuff. I was, um... ah, shit. I was wondering if you had anything like that as well?”

The words are spoken fast enough to almost slur together by the end, my face reddening even more when Elias raises an eyebrow at me.

“Are you asking if I have any particular kinks I need catered to, dear?”

“I guess...”

“And why would that be?”

I let out a frustrated huff. “Because I really like you! And I’d like to see you again, but I’d also like to know upfront if there’s going to be anything that’s like... an insurmountable incompatibility if this becomes a regular thing.”

“There,” Elias says, his lips ghosting against mine. “Isn’t it better when you tell the truth?”

“It’s embarrassing,” I mutter.

“But a very important point you bring up.”

I do feel better about it once Elias has validated the question. Like I’m not weird or perverted for asking. Although I obviously have a certain vested interest in knowing his answer.

Elias chuckles. “I don’t think I have anything I would consider to be a deal-breaker. However...” His voice lowers, deep and sensual. “If I were to have my way with you however I liked, I would have you bound and gagged on your knees before me, gifting me with your absolute submission.”

His words make my mouth go dry, and I bite my lip. “I like the sound of that.”

“Do you now, darling?”

“Yes, Sir,” I murmur. “Or...” I tilt my head, “... yes, Master?”

His eyes widen slightly before narrowing. “Minx,” he accuses lightly, giving a gentle pinch to my thigh. “I hope you realize that both Caelan and I

can be very rough when we truly let go.”

God. I can only imagine.

With them being demons, they could destroy me. In either a good way or a bad way, I’m not sure. Maybe both, but I can’t deny that the thought thrills me.

“I like it rough every so often,” I state firmly.

Not all the time, maybe, but a mix would be good—some nights like tonight, and others, when they utterly break me apart and piece me together again afterward.

I’m getting ahead of myself again. I don’t even know if they want to keep me around. How many times have I told myself? I *shouldn’t* get my hopes up. I shouldn’t get so damn attached to them.

Too late for that.

I feel like my heart might break if it is *over* after all this.

Elias hums, amused. “We’ll see how you feel about that in the morning. I imagine you’ll be sore enough after tonight.”

“Worth it,” I say, grinning at him.

He presses a kiss to my lips. “All right. Rest now, or you really will be suffering tomorrow.”

I nod. That is an order I’m more than happy to comply with.

There’s not really anything for me to get changed into. Neither my top nor jeans would be comfortable for sleeping in, and while I could sleep in my panties, those are utterly filthy from the amount I soaked through them earlier and frankly, I’d rather not. So, I drop my towel and crawl into bed naked.

Caelan cracks open an eye as the bed shifts. I lay down next to him, and he drapes an arm over my waist before returning to sleep. Elias joins us as well, pressing against my back.

I’m vaguely aware of the sensation of Elias’ lips grazing against the back of my neck, but the comfort of the pillow is like a siren’s call. I can’t hold it off any longer and sink into the bed, thoroughly exhausted and satisfied,

drifting off almost immediately.

I'm worn out enough to sleep more heavily than usual, my normal body clock thrown completely out of whack. There's always a point in the middle of my sleep cycle, usually in the early morning hours, when I blearily half-wake, uncomfortable in LA's heat, and need to toss the sheet off me. This time, it's already half-light when I finally surface back to consciousness.

It's even more uncomfortably warm now that we're sharing a bed. At some point, I roll over so Caelan can spoon me from behind, and he feels like a damn furnace pressed against my back. No wonder he hates the weather here. He doesn't need that on top of his own heat generation.

I wriggle my way out of Caelan's hold and drape myself over Elias instead, my head resting on his chest, grateful that he, at least, runs a fair bit cooler.

He wakes and glances at me, then runs a hand through my hair.

"Sorry," I mumble. "It's too warm. You're nice."

It's not the most coherent thing I've ever said, but Elias seems to understand.

"That's all right," he murmurs. "We're going to have to leave soon. Unfortunately, we do have other business to attend to today."

Right. The tour. They had one day off, but there are other shows they need to get to.

I groan softly.

The thought of moving right now is unbearable.

The thought of leaving them is unbearable.

"Go back to sleep," Elias says, kissing my forehead. I don't *want* to. Elias said they had to go, and I want to at least say goodbye, but I'm still too tired to resist.

I don't even remember falling asleep for a second time. The next thing I'm aware of is light streaming in through the gap in the curtain and that I'm alone in the bed. For a moment, it makes my heart ache like a bullet's been

put through it.

A metaphorical ache, but there are plenty of literal ones too.

I moan quietly as I stretch out, soreness lingering in my muscles. In my everything. *Goddamn*. Yeah. I got fucked last night, and my body sure knows about it. But it's a pleasurable pang, the kind that makes me feel like glowing.

My clothes are folded neatly on one chair, the key card for the room on top of them. A glass of water and a covered tray of food are on the bedside table. They ordered room service for me. That was thoughtful of them.

Despite waking alone, I don't feel abandoned, and that makes me so much happier than it should.

Of course, I appreciate the gesture for more practical reasons as well. After the amount of exertion last night, I'm utterly starving.

I stay curled up in the covers and eat my breakfast, closer to lunch by this point, in bed, taking my time. Not so much savoring the food, although that's good too, but savoring everything. Every memory of last night, of how they looked, what their touch felt like.

As much as I'd like to, I know I can't laze around the entire day. The checkout time is generous but still approaching. *Ugh*.

Only after I dress and head to the mirror, intending to run my fingers through my hair in the hopes of getting it halfway presentable, do I realize there's another issue. I don't have anything to cover my neck with, and, oh boy, did Caelan leave hickeys. Deep purpling bruises against my throat. And even aside from those, there are little marks all over me. I don't even remember getting half of them.

My cheek as well. This is the first chance I've had to inspect it properly, and it doesn't look *bad*. Okay. Maybe it looks a little bad. A vivid red gash just below my cheekbone, three or four inches long that will probably scar.

Worth it.

It's not the first time I've thought it, and it won't be the last.

So worth it.

I'm embarrassed to have to go out like this. There's no way people aren't going to look at me and *know*, but honestly, some part of me is delighted. It feels like evidence that last night really happened and that they wanted me enough to mark me up and claim me as theirs.

I reach for my phone, figuring I ought to work out directions to get back to the hostel I was *meant* to be staying to get my stuff—most importantly a change of clothes.

There's a note stuck to the back of my phone case, and I stare at it for a long moment. Trying to wrestle back the way my heart immediately soars. It doesn't mean—

There's hardly anything written—just two phone numbers. Signed with Elias and Caelan's names, and that's enough to make a grin break out on my face. They wouldn't have bothered unless they wanted me to call them, right? They want to see me again.

I really do need to get going, so I only allow myself a small moment to celebrate. But I flop back onto the bed, clutching the phone to my chest. It's ridiculous to be so damn excited over a phone number, but I'm fucking *happy, okay?*

My fingers shake slightly as I enter the numbers into my contacts. Even more so when I send a quick text, thanking them for leaving breakfast for me. I kind of want to thank them for everything last night, but that seems a little forward.

Thank you for fucking my brains out. Please do it again sometime.

As much as I laugh at the ridiculousness of my thoughts, I really hope I get to spend more time with them. If I was bad about crushing on them before, I can't imagine how awful it's going to be now, knowing what they're really like and capable of.

I'm addicted to them already. Maybe dangerously so, given what they are.

Long-term arrangements, huh?

I can't wait to see them again.

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Chapter Six

Returning to reality on Monday is surreal.

I spent most of Sunday in a blissful haze. I'd meant to do some generic sightseeing since I usually don't make the effort of going to LA often, but the whole concept of it seems so utterly mundane after being with Elias and Caelan. How the hell am I meant to think of anything apart from them?

It's not the sex, although that was certainly mind-blowing too. It's more the *actual goddamn demons* thing. They're more extraordinary than I ever could have dreamed. The whole world feels richer, more unfathomable, and more beautiful for having met them. And as if that weren't enough, they'd liked me. I think. They had liked me, right?

Even if it was just a groupie thing, take a random fan to bed for the night for a bit of fun, they didn't need to do the whole wining-and-dining thing. Or take care of me so well afterward. Or give me their numbers.

It feels almost narcissistic to think I could be of any interest or appeal to beings like *that*. But they'd been so easy to talk to, so fun to be around. I thought I'd sensed a connection, more than with anyone I'd met in years.

The proof of that is evident when I return to school and work.

I cover the love bites on my throat as best I can. It's too hot for a turtleneck, but I wrap a lightweight stole around my neck and cover the remaining bruising with concealer. The gash on my cheek I leave, though. I

don't like the idea of getting makeup on it, and Elias did such a good job of applying the wound closure strips that I don't want to mess with them. I'd rather not disturb it and accidentally start it bleeding again.

Besides, I'm almost proud of the injury, what it led to, and what it means. I don't *want* to cover it.

No one asks about it anyway, and that's exactly my point.

There are people I'm acquaintances with—lab partners, a study group, and people who kept saying we'd hang out outside of class—but nothing ever got arranged, and then the offers stopped. Either they don't care, or they don't feel close enough to say anything about an obvious injury.

It's disheartening to go back to the absence of connection after how amazing the weekend was. And it sets an uneasy pit gnawing at my stomach. I'm not good at keeping up relationships. I thought I'd hit it off pretty well with a lot of people here at school and there was the potential for friendship, but then nothing came of it. *What if the same happens with Elias and Caelan?*

I catch sight of my reflection, the vivid red gash across my cheek, and I remember what it was like to be with them. My chest flutters with too much joy to care too much about concerns like that.

Grace, however, notices the injury.

My first shift back at the lab is on Tuesday afternoon. Grace is taking her lunch break as I arrive, and she catches me as I pass the break room.

"Shannon!" she greets. "Good to see you survived LA. How was the rest of your trip?"

I turn to her, sheepishly realizing I don't know how to answer even that simple question. *How can I even explain anything?*

Her eyes fall to my cheek, and a kaleidoscope of fragmented emotions flutter across her face. Shock, concern, anger, then she quickly schools her expression into something neutral. "What happened?" she asks, folding her arms.

“Oh. It’s nothing, Grace. Dumb accident with a knife.”

“On your *face*?”

“Told you it was dumb.”

“Shannon... you’re a terrible liar. A cut on your hand or something I’d buy, but no one puts knives near their faces.” She stops and softens. “You’re okay, right? It wasn’t like a mugging or—”

“No! No,” I insist. I know where her mind must be going, and I cut off that train of thought immediately. “Nothing like that, Christ.”

“I mean, LA and all...”

I laugh. “No. LA was...” There are no words for it, really. “Amazing.” The last of my statement comes out dreamily.

Grace’s eyebrows raise. “That was *not* an oh-the-city-was-really-cool amazing. That was an I- met-a-guy-and-got-some-serious-dick amazing.”

“Grace! What the hell,” I splutter.

Shit. That is a little too on the nose. Maybe she’s right about me being a terrible liar. It’s not even about lying, really. Apparently, I just have absolutely zero ability to keep a poker face. She’s clearly onto *something*, and the way my face is heating up is doing nothing to help.

I consider it. She knows Goëtica, she was there for the concert too. I could say I ran into Elias and Caelan. That’s true enough, and she would probably buy the dreamy sigh just being a fangirl thing. The specific details don’t need to be mentioned.

Grace is friendly, and I enjoy her company, but we’re not *very* close. It’s only a workplace friendship. And it’s probably a bad idea to have anyone in a work scenario knowing anything about anyone else’s sex life. But, God, I want to spill everything.

It *was* amazing, and keeping everything to myself makes me feel like I’m going to explode. Not the demon aspect. She’d probably think I was crazy. I’m not even sure I’m not crazy myself half the time, but would it matter that much to share some of it?

I can't decide right now.

I don't really have the time to.

"I need to put my stuff away and get to the lab to start my shift. Can we talk about this later?"

"You're deflecting," Grace accuses lightly.

"For real, though. I don't want to be late."

"All right. You do know I'm going to come hunt you down later? I'm still not okay with you just having that cut and no explanation."

"Accident," I mumble.

"Uh-huh."

She means well. Joking aside, she'd back off if I told her seriously, but who else do I have to talk to?

Well. Elias and Caelan, now. Kind of. It's too early to have established any real post-one-night stand dynamic, but Caelan's already taken to sending me photos from backstage and complaining about Elias being too busy supervising the sound check to give him a blow job. To which Elias promptly replied that it was a group chat, followed by:

Elias: *Caelan, I can see everything you say.*

Caelan had texted back with a winking smiley face.

Caelan: *I know.*

That made me snort alone in my apartment, just reading their exchange. They had said they worked better with someone else involved, a counterbalance to

their antagonism, but I can't help but wonder if, in some way, that was what *I* needed too. I've never been good at maintaining one-on-one conversations. With three of us, it feels easier. The flow is more natural.

I've never had anything against polyamorous relationships, theoretically. I'd just never given it any serious consideration. After all, if I struggled to make emotional connections and get a normal monogamous relationship to work, who was I to imagine making a relationship work with *more* than one person?

Yet it felt natural. Elias and Caelan clearly had no qualms about it. It clicked the same way I'd connected with them—a neat little triad. I like the idea of that.

I send two quick messages, the first teasingly letting Caelan know that I have workmates asking about the cut *he* left and the second to explain I'll be away from the phone for a while. No mobiles in the lab for biohazard reasons.

I don't expect them to reply for a while anyway. They have another show to play tonight, so they'll be busy.

Tossing my bag and phone into my locker, I head to the lab. Now, I have to actually focus. I can get away with daydreaming during lectures, but it's not worth messing up blood samples because I'm too busy swooning over a pair of hot demon boys.

The mental break is nice, honestly. I do like my job. It's the simplest role in the lab, merely processing samples, splitting serum from the rest of the blood into separate tubes for testing, and labeling everything with names and barcodes. And whatever other assistive tasks are required. It seems like it should be repetitive, but it requires sustained focus. I find the process almost meditative, in a way.

People regularly tell me to aim higher. The lab managers who assume I intend to progress up the career ladder once I complete my degree, the careers advisors at my college, and even Grace try to pressure me into doing

something more her level.

I don't want to. Not really. I feel more trapped by others' expectations than anything about the work itself. They tell me I'm wasting my intelligence, that I could be so much more, and I *could*. But if I'm not happy, then what's the point? I've never wanted a high-flying, high-stress job, even if the pay is better. I don't want that level of responsibility or the pressure of managing others.

Of course, the problem has always been working out what I want instead. I've never had an answer to that. The best I have ever come up with is to have the energy and creativity left to pursue my own hobbies in my free time and be able to *live* instead of having my existence drained by permanent stress and long hours.

But now. Now I do have something I want. For the first time in so long, to feel something like *passion*.

Elias and Caelan. I can't get them out of my head.

I get through the work, practiced and efficient. As distracting as Elias and Caelan may be, I can still focus when necessary. It's nice to get caught up in something else instead of playing through endless daydreams where I get to see more of them.

As usual, the reception manager has to remind me to take my break. I don't like leaving any task unfinished. If I'm in the middle of processing a batch of samples, I have to be dragged away, or I won't rest until it's done.

I sort of wish I *had* been allowed to take my break late. Grace has learned the pattern of my breaktimes, and she's already in the breakroom when I enter. She's finished for the day, being on an earlier shift, but must have waited for me knowing I would only be a few minutes more.

Dammit. I had all that time to think, and I didn't even consider what I wanted to say to her.

I need someone to be my confidante. Especially since—though I don't like to think of it—I *have* considered the possibility of things going very,

very wrong. They're demons, after all. I never got the feeling they meant any harm, and they never behaved in any way to make me doubt them, but maybe they're just good actors. I don't know for sure that I can trust them. I want to, though. Something in my heart does already.

Maybe the problem is that I can't trust myself.

In any case, somebody ought to know. At least their names, who I've gotten myself tangled up with, if not strictly *what* I've gotten myself tangled up with.

"Hey, Grace," I say. The sentence hangs in the air, lingering with my intent to continue, but I don't have the words.

She sighs and runs a hand through her curls. "I've been worrying about you all afternoon, girl. Just tell me. On a scale of one to ten, how worried do I need to be?"

"There's nothing to worry about," I reply instinctively, then wince. Even when I've already decided I want to talk about it, it's so deeply ingrained in me to not bother people, not burden anyone with my troubles, that I end up spewing little white lies to gloss over the whole thing.

"Maybe about a three," I amend, then pause. "Or... seven." Depending on how one views the whole demon thing.

Ten if they decided they didn't want me around anymore.

I finally blurt it out. "I ran into Elias and Caelan."

For a moment, I can practically see Grace's mind ticking over and letting the names slot into place in her recollection, combining it with the awkward way I was behaving earlier. "Wait, the band guys?"

I nod, and she grabs my hands and beams.

"Hey, that's awesome! I know how much you liked them! When was this? *How?*"

"Saturday evening. I went to the old theater they did their first gigs at, just as, like, a nostalgia thing, you know? And apparently... so did they."

"Wow," she says, whistling through her teeth. "That's one hell of a

coincidence.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“And? What were they like?”

“They...” Dammit. I can feel my face heating up in embarrassment and something like nerves fluttering in my stomach. I can’t say too much. I wasn’t planning to. But even faced with the possibility of saying it, it hits me just how absurd the whole thing is.

What if I *am* crazy? What if they were keeping up the act to mess with me and special effects really are all it ever was? That makes no sense. They would’ve needed tracking projectors and all sorts of equipment, yet it was flawless in a way that would be impossible to replicate with anything so crude as that. I am *intimately* aware, after all. Their strength, how utterly otherworldly they were. That’s something that couldn’t possibly be a mere fabrication.

But what if it was all in my head?

What if someone really spiked my drink at the concert that night, and it took a while to kick in? Even that seems more reasonable than demons. Or what if I’m completely delusional?

Yet the cut on my cheek is real. The hickeys all over my neck are real. The numbers they gave me were real because I’ve been texting them since.

“Shannon?”

“It’s still just... surreal.” I shake my head, trying to snap myself out of it. “They were incredible, but it all feels like a dream. I can hardly believe it happened.”

Grace laughs gently. “Well, did you get a photo with them? An autograph?”

“Huh? Oh. I didn’t even think about that.”

“Shannon! Seriously? You met them and got nothing?”

“I was flustered and distracted,” I defend. “It honestly never occurred to me.”

“So, what did you do? Did you get to talk to them much?”

The opening is right there. Grace has given me an out. All I need to say is we talked, but my traitorous mind vividly reminds me of what else we did. Of their lips, their touch all over me, the feel of them fucking me.

I swallow. I can feel the heat in my cheeks, flushing my face into a deep crimson. “Um. Yeah. We talked a bunch.”

Of course, she notices. Grace slowly raises an eyebrow. “Just talking? Shannon, honey, what did you *do*?”

That only makes me blush even harder. The rest of the break room is empty, thankfully. There’s no one around to overhear, but I still don’t know if I should admit to the truth.

Grace solves that dilemma for me. “Tell me you didn’t seriously do the groupie thing.”

“I didn’t *mean* to!”

“Oh my God, you *did*.”

I bury my face in my hands, trying to hide my shame. But even as embarrassed as I am, it feels so good to say anything about it at all. It comes out in a rush. “I mean, we *talked* a lot first too. They took me out to dinner, and we were there for hours. They were so much nicer to me than they needed to be and so goddamn gorgeous. I can’t describe what they’re really like. Like, I can’t. It doesn’t even feel real, but...” I hesitate just a fraction of a second, wondering if I’m really going to be so crudely forward as to finish the sentence the way I want to, “... the dick certainly was.”

Grace shrieks. “*Girl!*”

Her reaction makes me laugh, setting my nerves at ease a little. It’s so much more normal, more human, to just gossip about it instead of worrying so much.

“Wait, wait. You said you met Elias *and* Caelan. Did you like... with both?”

I nod in confirmation.

“Shannon, Christ! It’s always the quiet ones, huh? God, you’ve been *getting some* and only now you’re spilling the beans?”

“Stop!” I say, half laughing, half embarrassed. “Just don’t call me out on it like that.”

Grace shakes her head but quiets down. As she settles, the initial shock fading, her tone turns serious. “Okay, but listen. As your friend and someone who worries about you, you were safe, right? And they didn’t pressure you into anything? I know how some of those goddamn Hollywood pricks can be ___”

“No,” I immediately cut off. “I wanted it. And, yeah, we were safe.”

I’m damn sure you could fry an egg on my face by this point.

She seems somewhat appeased but is still eyeing me with concern tainting her expression. “All right. If you’re happy.”

“They gave me their numbers.”

“Shannon, honey...”

“I know it doesn’t really necessarily mean anything,” I quickly disclaim.

“You like them, don’t you?”

“Well, *yeah*. I wouldn’t have slept with them if I didn’t like them. They were... amazing and so much fun to be around, and they really did look out for me and seem interested in what I had to say.”

Grace stays silent, her expression more somber now. She reaches out and places her hand on my knee. “I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but girl to girl, and we’ve all been there, don’t go falling for them, yeah? They’re hot, but they’re guys, and you barely know them. Especially in a situation like that, they probably just see you as a groupie.”

She’s right. I don’t want to hear it, and the reminder makes me deflate.

“I don’t want you getting your heart broken over this,” she says firmly.

“I know.” I sigh. It’s not like I haven’t thought it myself often enough, utterly torn between the euphoria of everything that happened, imagining more, and the bitter realization that reality doesn’t play out that way. I’m only

setting myself up for disappointment and heartbreak if I get too attached to the fantasy of it all.

It doesn't make it any easier to hear.

"My break is pretty much over. I gotta get back to the lab," I say reluctantly. We both stand, and she hugs me tightly.

"Hey. Tell me the deets some other time, yeah?"

I snort. "Oh, God. No... no. Nobody needs to hear about that."

"Uh-huh? Well, if you wanna spill any time, I'm always here for that sweet goss. Also, *don't* think I've forgotten you still haven't explained that cut. Was that from them too?"

"Don't worry about it. I can explain some other time. And I'll, uh... keep that in mind." I smile and wave her off as she heads home. My smile dies on my lips once I'm out of sight, turning in the other direction to get back to work myself.

Why does it have to be so complicated? I was *fine* without a relationship. I'd learned to be perfectly content with my own company. Life was so much easier without trying to deal with romantic feelings, not getting hung up over anyone, and having so much more energy and free time for myself.

One night with them, and they've shaken my whole existence to the core.

I snort to myself. Yeah, getting attached and hardcore crushing on anyone is the world-shaker here. Not the part about them being *fucking demons*.

I shrug on my lab coat, grab a fresh pair of gloves, and return to my lab bench. I don't want to think about it anymore. Grace's words have left me unsettled.

She's right. I know she's right. That is what's the worst about it. I talked so much about myself, but they didn't talk about themselves in return. I hardly know anything about them. Not really.

It feels a little uncomfortable, weird, or stalkerish, perhaps. *As if tracking down the theater wasn't?* But I want to find out more about them. They're at least decently famous, after all. Goëtica's music is niche but well-known

within that market. I've skimmed the fan forums before. I know there's *some* information about them online.

The moment I get home, I swing my bag off my shoulder and boot up my laptop.

Where to start? I don't even know the most basic details like how old they are or their surnames. That never seemed to matter. Of course, there's every chance that information would be falsified, even if it is available. I doubt whatever ages they may have given would be the truth.

A Wiki page exists for the band, at least. The band page is straightforward. Nothing I didn't know there—the year it was formed, albums, dates, chart positions, and information about older tours.

Goëtica is an American alternative symphonic metal band based in Los Angeles, California. The band is known for its dedication to its concept, utilizing imagery of the members as supernatural beings throughout all albums and live appearances. Performing under stage names, Elias provides vocals and keyboard, and Caelan features on guitar. In studio albums, Caelan is also responsible for drums. Both share songwriting credit on all albums produced. There are currently seven available studio albums...

Basic. Blatantly obvious. What *is* telling, however, is that even the page doesn't have surnames for them. It states that Elias and Caelan are stage names. There are links to pages for each of them, but it's not *them*, as in, the people. It's only a short stub about the characters they portray on stage.

The only line relating to their personal lives is to say they keep their privacy, with nobody knowing so much as their actual names.

Because maybe they don't even *have* true names. It's just Elias. Just Caelan.

I'm quite confident they must have at least fake surnames they use. It would be impossible to navigate society without them. But in terms of the actual names they were given or prefer to go by, it is just first names. *I suppose demons don't have much use for surnames.*

I follow the search deeper, encountering less mere factual reporting and more fan sites and forums.

There is *some* information.

Nothing concrete. Nothing confirmed. I don't know where these people even get their sources. So much seems just hearsay.

Neither Elias nor Caelan are originally from LA or even the West Coast. They try to pin Caelan as an East Coast boy, although I get a headache trying to read through senseless debates over his accent. It's not identifiable as any one thing. They're right, I can hear some New York in it and something from further south, but the only thing I can tell is that it sounds like he's traveled and lived in many different places. Elias, on the other hand, came from Europe, although that was a good couple of decades ago.

No surnames. No birthdates. No ages. From looks alone, they could be in their late twenties or early thirties, but even that is a guess.

The consensus is that the 'real' people behind Elias and Caelan are cryptids of the highest order. It's almost ironic, in a way. They're practically hiding in plain sight.

Everything else, the majority of what anyone cares about, focuses on the details of their appearance, the demonic characteristics, and the powers they seem to have. The stories of the characters they've created, and their personas.

I don't want to start digging too deep into the story element. Elias had said that what was shown in the videos was exaggerated. That implies there *is*, nonetheless, a grain of truth to it. But how do I know what's real and what's not? What's just a song, and what is a reference to what they think, feel, or have been through? I can't go down that path. I'd be wandering

blindly, never knowing where to draw the line and making assumptions that could easily come back to bite me in the ass.

With a frustrated sigh, I close all the tabs I have open. There's nothing. Nothing goddamn useful.

All I want is to get to know more about them. I don't mean it to be in any weird way. I just *like* them. I'm curious.

The entire notion is silly, though. As if knowing some basic facts would make us closer or make it more likely for things to work out.

My gaze falls on my phone, and I laugh wryly at myself. *Idiot*. I'm going about this all wrong, looking up things about them online. If I want to get to know them, I can just call.

Not that I'm going to ask them directly. I'm hardly about to interrogate them. I want to keep in contact, spend more time chatting with them, and, yeah, I'll admit, get closer to them. But closeness doesn't come from knowing a bunch of useless trivia facts about them.

Keeping in contact has never been one of my strengths, and I know I've missed so many opportunities because I'm too awkward to be the one to start a conversation. I absolutely refuse to make the same mistake this time.

I open my messages and ask how their day has been.

Chapter Seven

Three months.

Time is moving so fast that it doesn't seem like it's been so long since we first ran into each other. It's a little nerve-wracking.

I take the bus to LA, giving me too much time to think. Enough time that I calculate dates, which makes me think of it at all. That's how long it's been since I've seen them.

There's something unsettling about the realization.

What if going to see Elias and Caelan again is a mistake?

Technically, I've only *met* them once before, been on one date together, then had sex. Utterly amazing sex, but their experience is probably more extensive, and their opinions may differ.

I don't know.

What if they don't want me around anymore?

They wouldn't have kept in contact all this time, I remind myself. God, I'm being dumb. They are not exactly human. A pair of demons have no reason to play nice with my feelings. They would have told me to fuck off in no uncertain terms if they weren't interested. Instead, they spent hours texting and calling, sending pictures of backstage locations while complaining about how the tour was going, and responding to the racy pictures I'd sent with even racier ones of their own. Though, that was mainly Caelan. And then

there are those entire paragraphs Elias and I regularly sent each other, interspersed with Caelan ribbing us for being so verbose.

If they didn't want me around, they wouldn't have invited me to this event in the first place.

From the way they described it, it's a combination of an awards ceremony and a gala. A smaller event focused on the indie and alternative music industry rather than the glitz and glamour of a full-scale awards ceremony. Which I'm glad for. Just that much feels out of my league already.

My stomach is still doing weird flips as the bus pulls up to the LA bus depot. I can't pin down quite what it is. Excitement. Anticipation. Nerves. All the above.

I grab my bags, a small shoulder bag for going out during the day and a larger one packed with the usual weekend getaway items, tickets and bookings, and the fanciest dress I own.

In less than a quarter of an hour, I will be at the hotel where the event is being held and where we'll be staying, where Elias and Caelan will be.

I don't have all the details. Elias has a role in the proceedings, but that's as much as I know. He never specified what. I don't think it's an actual performance since Caelan adamantly refused to go on stage. Or "*Refused to be gawped at by a bunch of prissy-ass Hollywood shitheads*" was his way of phrasing that.

He was still coming to spend the weekend, and Elias had invited me to join them. The gala will only take up Saturday evening, so I'll be free to spend the rest of the time with them.

Of course, I'd jumped at the opportunity.

Perhaps I should've thought it through a little more because my nerves aren't abating at all. My stop comes up on the bus, and I find my way to the hotel. Then it hits me that I didn't investigate what would be involved.

I am so far out of my depth.

Maybe it's a smaller event, as far LA galas go, but it's still being held in

the Millennium Biltmore Hotel. They gave me the name, but I didn't bother to look the place up. So I'm entirely unprepared to step into a vast, opulent corridor of marble and gilt-patterned ceilings, with chandeliers and carved columns like something out of an old English manor.

I severely regret wearing jeans.

Clutching my ticket for the gala and a copy of the room booking paperwork hard enough to crumple the edges, I talk my way through the typical hotel sign-in script in a distracted haze. Elias, it seems, has already taken the room but left instructions for the second room key to be provided for me.

I quickly type, firing off a message from my phone.

Me: *I've just arrived. Shall I just head up?*

There's no immediate response, but I don't want to loiter too long in the lobby, either. I thank the receptionist and pick up my bags, idling slowly along the corridor in the general direction of the room. The hotel is impressive. Beautiful. Elegant. Rich, but not tastelessly so.

It's gorgeous really.

I still feel underdressed, but it's not that bad. There are other people meandering through who look like simple tourists too. And Caelan is never one to bother with fancier things. I'm certain he'll be in his ripped jeans, same as always, and probably grimacing in disgust at the whole affair. Elias must be in his element, though.

Speaking of, Elias is here. I can feel his presence in the way the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, the shiver running down my spine, the faint brush of his shadows like a cold fog reaching out and curling through my fingers.

He's doing it on purpose, letting me sense him from a distance so as not to startle me. I turn to find him behind me, waiting in the overhang of an archway on the other side of the corridor. His lips curl up into a small smile as our eyes meet.

This is exactly the moment I've been worrying about. What do I even say to them, finally seeing them in person again after all these months?

"Hi," seems redundant and childish. But it's all I have, and I find myself blurting it helplessly as I walk across to join him.

"Hello," Elias greets in return, the tone of it low and smooth. Almost a purr, and damn, I'd forgotten how much his voice could affect me, hearing it in person like that. His smile turns to more of a smirk. "Did you miss me?"

I grin in return, laughing. "Yeah. Yeah, I did."

Admitting it this way, in response to his facetious inquiry, is far less daunting than accepting it for real. Elias doesn't need to know exactly how much I missed him and Caelan.

Because *God*, I missed them. And that's a whole other complicated mess because this really isn't something I should get feelings involved in. I was already more attached to them than was wise after our first night together, and the time spent apart, playing a long-distance game, has only made it worse instead of getting any better.

It worries me sometimes. The moments I remember what they are, that maybe like Grace said, it's not exactly *safe* to let my guard down and allow them to steal my heart.

But all my worries melt away as Elias wraps one arm around my waist, his other hand gently tilting my head back so he can press our lips together. Just briefly, a greeting kiss and nothing more, but there's enough heat behind it to assure me that Elias hasn't forgotten about what went down during our last encounter.

I'm grinning again by the time we part. Probably a stupid, infatuated smile, but I don't mind. Elias picks up the larger of my luggage while I sling

my shoulder bag on and fall into stride beside him as he leads us back to the room we'll be sharing.

“So, what’s the plan?” I ask. Tomorrow is the gala, which will take up most of the evening. But there’s still tonight and then during the day before the start of the event.

Elias gives a hum of consideration. “Have you eaten yet?”

It’s bordering on dinnertime, inching firmly into the evening, but the journey consumed all my time for the afternoon. I shake my head in response to the question. That probably means another restaurant date is on the cards.

“Good,” he says. “I have a meeting with some of the organizers to discuss my role in this little farce, but that will not be until later.”

I nod. However, I can’t help but be curious. “What *is* your role? If you’re allowed to say.”

Elias huffs and gives his neck a small crack, pressing the button to call the elevator. “Hosting a minor segment. An appearance on stage, announcing a few names, some ‘special effects.’ Nothing more.”

There’s a slightly mocking tone in the way he says ‘special effects,’ and I wince on his behalf. It must kind of suck to have who you are being dragged down to the level of a gimmick. The choice was either that or hiding it entirely, so I understand the decision. There’s no winning either way.

“You agreed to that?”

Elias’ smile shows too many teeth, the darkness in his eyes unsettling. “A few *parlor tricks* for the favors I can leverage in return? Yes, I agreed.”

Sometimes I forget who, or rather *what*, I’m dealing with exactly. It sends a shiver through me—part fear, part thrill—at the reminder of how powerful and utterly devastating Elias has the potential to be.

I don’t ask any more questions.

Not that I would have had the chance to do so anyway. The elevator deposits us on our floor, and the room is a few doors down. Elias swipes the key card, allowing us entry.

“Took ya long enough,” is the first thing I hear. I’ve barely taken a few steps into the room before I drop my bag with a yelp of surprise. Caelan doesn’t give me the courtesy of allowing me to notice him first or even walk over like a normal person. There’s a crackle of electricity, then he’s *there*. He moves like lightning, almost. Quick enough to startle the hell out of me.

He slings an affectionate arm around my shoulders, ruffling my hair.

“Hey!” I protest mildly but gladly allow the contact. “I’m here exactly when I said I would be. Don’t give me that ‘long enough’ bullshit,” I tease him in return.

Elias picks up my bag for me and ushers Caelan and me further into the room, so he can at least close the door behind us. “Caelan is impatient,” he notes dryly.

That is kind of flattering, though, that he was impatient to see me again. Just like I was impatient to see them.

Caelan scoffs at being called out on his eagerness. “You spent at least twenty minutes longer than usual trying to get your eyeliner fuckin’ immaculate or something, emo boy,” he tosses back.

I laugh, delighted. “It’s eyeliner? Not some sunken-eyed demon thing?”

“It is aesthetically pleasing and works with the image of our band,” Elias defends, shooting a hard glare at Caelan. “Perhaps *you* should make some effort to not look like a complete trash animal at some point.”

“You love my trash, and you know it,” Caelan says. He throws himself onto the bed and sprawls across it, hands behind his head and a wicked light in his eyes.

God, I forgot just how much I missed them snarking at each other. I’m pretty sure that it’s their way of flirting.

I grin. “You’re both gorgeous as hell. Eyeliner or not.”

Caelan sits back up with an amused, wry smile and grabs my hips between his hands, pulling me toward the bed, toward him, until my knees hit the edge. Staring down at him like this, held loosely between his legs and

only a few inches between us, reminds me it's no exaggeration. He is gorgeous in a surreal, terrifying kind of way.

Even as unnatural as he appears, with his slit pupils, glowing eyes, and inhumanly sharp teeth and claws, it all increases his appeal. Maybe his style is more informal than Elias', but I wouldn't want to change a damn thing. The ripped skinny jeans and heavy boots look fantastic on him. A suit wouldn't cling to Caelan's thighs or show off his hips so deliciously.

Then again, Caelan in a suit...

"Oh. Hey. Are you going to be coming to the gala?"

Caelan wrinkles his nose. "Nah. Fancy-ass bullshit ain't my scene."

"That's a shame. I would've liked to see you all dressed up."

He narrows his eyes. "Why? Are you calling me a trash animal too?"

I don't get the chance to deny the accusation. Caelan lifts me by the waist and flings me onto the bed. "No!" I shriek, laughing. "No, I think your style is hot as hell!"

He leans over me, pinning me down with his hands on either side of my shoulders. It might have been intimidating if his grin hadn't made it clear he was only playing. "But you want to see me *dressed up*," he says, scornfully emphasizing the words.

I shrug as best as I can, given my current predicament. I'm so incredibly tempted to squirm beneath him. Still, I want to avoid doing anything that will make me even more flustered because, *hello*, being pinned to the bed by Caelan is making my face feel warm already.

"It'd just be something different, and different is fun," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'd like to see Elias in casual clothes too. It works both ways."

"Would you now?" Elias comments, sounding mildly interested in the conversation now that he's been brought into it.

"Mmm... maybe." Even though the tailored waistcoat he has on today is gorgeous, and I wouldn't complain if he wanted to keep wearing it.

“Unfortunate. I didn’t pack anything you would consider ‘casual.’”

“You must own *some* casual clothes. You’d look good in a tight tank top. You have the arms for it. Something like that wouldn’t be so bad, would it?”

Elias smiles. “It wouldn’t, but I’m still not going to.”

I snort a laugh. “Fine. Be like that.”

Caelan lets me sit up again now that the topic seems to have come to a close, and I arrange myself into a more presentable position on the bed. Caelan’s hand still somehow manages to find its way around my waist in the process.

“What about you?” Elias asks smoothly.

“Hmm?”

“What are *you* intending to wear to the gala?”

“Oh. Right.” Honestly, I’m glad he asked. This is all new to me, and I have no idea if my outfit is acceptable. Whatever else Elias may be, he at least seems to have a sense of style. A second pair of eyes would be welcome.

I slip out of Caelan’s grip and go for my bag. Come to think of it, I should get the dress out anyway. Give it a day to uncrumple before I have to wear it.

It was a gem of a thrift store find. It was an honest-to-God ballgown with ruffled layers reaching to the floor, a low, off-the-shoulder neckline, and a corset.

Elias only nods, but his eyes are alight with approval. “You’ll look lovely,” he says, then adds regretfully, “It’s a shame I won’t get to dance with you on the night.”

Oh. My heart sinks, although I do my best not to let it show. “You won’t?”

“I’ll be backstage most of the time, I’m afraid.” Of course, I should have figured that. “But perhaps tonight we could go and take an early look at the ballroom,” he offers.

“All right. That would be nice.”

The more I think about it, the more I warm up to the idea. I'm not exactly the most confident dancer. I watched a few tutorial videos online last week in preparation, knowing it would be useful, but it's not as though I practiced, so dancing with Elias without the pressure of an audience might be preferable. Or no audience other than Caelan. Hopefully.

I turn back to Caelan. He's flipped onto his front on the bed now, chin resting on his fist as he watches Elias and me. "You gonna come dance too?" I ask him. "Just us?"

"Pfft. You think I know any of that kinda ballroom crap?"

"You know I'd be happy to teach you," Elias says.

"You know I don't give enough of a shit to learn."

I hang my dress over the back of the room's armchair, then poke Caelan lightly in his side. "Come with us anyway."

Caelan reaches out. I think he's going to bat my hand away, but he grips my wrist and pulls me across to him. Then he sits up, and, with a small yelp and a giggle, I find myself practically on his lap.

"Why? You wanna see *my* style of dancing?" He purrs, suggestively rolling his hips up against me, flustering me more.

It's the sort of move that makes me think of dark, smoky clubs with strobe lights cutting through the fog and dirty electro beats. I can imagine Caelan grabbing my hips and pressing himself up against me, grinding together in time to the pounding music that throbs through us like a heartbeat.

My breath catches in my throat. "Also acceptable," I say, swallowing a groan.

Caelan grins. "That's what I thought."

"Be that as it may," Elias interrupts, clearing his throat. There's a quiet smile on his face, one eyebrow raised as he watches us. "We have a reservation for dinner in a little over half an hour. Any 'dancing' of whatever kind will have to wait for later."

"Shame," Caelan mumbles against my neck, reluctantly letting go of me

again.

Honestly, I'm equally as reluctant to leave, but I swing my legs over to sit sensibly on the side of the bed. "When do we need to leave? Is it far?"

"Not at all. A block away. But I thought it best to give sufficient warning."

Caelan groans. "Is it some fancy shithole again?"

"No, Caelan, your jeans will be adequate. It's simply a rooftop restaurant that overlooks the hotel and the square outside."

"Sounds good," I interject before Caelan can complain further. Knowing Elias, and despite what he may say, I suspect the restaurant must be at least relatively high-end. I'm also tempted to stay in my jeans in solidarity with Caelan, but I already have other plans.

I may have spent far too long thinking about what to wear this weekend.

"I'm gonna take a quick shower before we head out, then, if that's okay? I'm all gross from traveling."

"Of course."

It's not exactly that I mean or want to make a big deal of trying to look nice for them, but I kind of do. I packed a casual evening dress for tonight, a slim black A-line that zips up the front and goes down to around mid-thigh. I might as well wear it.

I don't normally take long to get ready to go out, but I suddenly relate to Elias spending twenty minutes on his eyeliner.

I shower and dress. While packing, I'd deliberated whether I should bring my nice lingerie. Was that too presumptuous? But I'm glad now I did. After all, this *is*, technically, still a friends-with-benefits arrangement, if that. Of course, sex was going to be in the cards.

I pair my short black dress, lacy panties, garters, and fishnet thigh-highs with combat boots, because they're more comfortable and also *aesthetic*. I'm sure Caelan, at least, will appreciate it.

But I'm making an effort.

For them.

It pays off.

“Daaang.” Caelan whistles as I return from the bathroom. “I forgot how cute you are.”

A smile spreads across my face, flattered by the attention. Caelan’s taken over my position sitting on the edge of the bed, and I laugh as he grabs me, dragging me between his legs. He runs his hands up my thighs beneath the dress until he reaches the garter straps. He pings one of them and narrows his eyes. “*Very* cute.”

Flattered and a little flustered, I protest, “Caelan!”

Elias slides an arm around my waist, guiding me away from Caelan’s wandering hands. “Delectable,” he agrees. “But shall we get going?”

It’s still a bit early as I didn’t take *that* long to get ready, but Caelan and Elias are both ready to go, and there’s no reason to wait. Elias said it wasn’t far, but we may as well take our time meandering over.

We leave through a different entrance on the other side of the hotel, through what had been the original lobby. It’s still gorgeously dramatic, with high ceilings and a sweeping staircase leading to an elegant collection of tables and plush chairs.

The street outside is far less impressive in comparison. We step out into downtown LA, and it’s back to gray, soulless concrete. I wish I’d thought to wear a jacket more substantial than my thin shrug. On the cusp of December, even LA has a crisp chill in the air after dark. Holiday decorations are going up in the park, and twinkling lights and festive gazebos suggest some kind of event will take place there too.

Elias was certainly correct about the restaurant not being far. It’s essentially just on the adjacent corner of the square. He seems to be leading us into another hotel or apartment complex, and I frown in confusion for a moment. But when we enter the elevator, I notice the restaurant’s name emblazoned next to the button for the top floor.

That's right. I remember Elias mentioning it was a rooftop location.

Caelan is rolling his eyes on my other side, fingers twitching. Despite Elias' assurances that it wasn't overly fancy, the entrance and elevator already hint otherwise.

I move closer, letting my shoulder brush against his. "This is nice and all, but next date, do you fancy just staying in and getting pizza or something? Netflix and chill?" I suggest.

The offer makes Caelan snort. He doesn't answer, though, because the doors open before he has the chance. Another elevator takes patrons two floors further to the very top. Then we finally step into the restaurant.

To the left, there's a long bar and an eclectic selection of traditional dining tables amongst couches with coffee tables scattered throughout the room. Tall windows and patio doors take up most of the two walls to the front and right, leading out onto a balcony filled with sprawling greenery and more tables, then views of the city beyond.

Okay. That is actually nice.

I'm not a huge fan of LA, honestly. Certainly not in this downtown area. I've never been a fan of big inner cities, there's too much in the way of dull, grimy buildings, construction work, and concrete grunge. But LA seems almost magical in the dim evening light, with the city lights glittering all around like the interior of a galaxy.

Magical? Really?

I am being a total sap about it, and even to myself, the thought is immediately embarrassing. I'm getting way too carried away. Going out on a date with Elias and Caelan again makes my heart swell and being here with them, I'm happy. Genuinely happy. Far happier than I should be.

I need to get a grip.

"You're quiet," Elias notes once we've sat down and settled ourselves at a round, glass patio table nestled back into some greenery at the edge of the balcony. Elias can sound so genuinely concerned like this, not pushing, just

allowing me the space to talk if I want to.

He's *nice*. He has been so goddamn nice through all of this, and it's growing more and more difficult to reconcile the way he acts toward me compared to what I know he is and what he's capable of.

It seems too good to be true, and part of me is waiting for this to self-destruct around me.

I shake my head. "Just thinking. Dumb anxious shit. Distract me?"

"Hmm. Well, first distraction, do you fancy a cocktail?"

Caelan perks up at that. Elias offers me the drink menu, but Caelan intercepts and grabs it from him first.

"That's more like it," Caelan says emphatically. I can't help but giggle, and Caelan directs a half-hearted glare in my direction. "Hey, the sweet free food and alcohol is the only reason I put up with the prick dragging me out to smarmy-ass restaurants at all."

"Sounds reasonable," I say, covering my smile with my hand.

"Elias enjoys showing off with this shit, like a fuckin' overcompensating peacock or something. Believe me, the appeal wears off quick."

"I hardly think he's overcompensating. I've already tapped that, you realize. And so have you."

Caelan lets out an inelegant snort. "All right, I'll give ya that one. More like showing off how big his dick is, then."

"You two realize I'm right here?" Elias asks, eyebrow quirked.

I laugh, and Elias lightly taps a finger against my thigh as a reminder to behave. I grin at him.

"To the original point. Cocktails?"

"Fuck yeah," Caelan agrees before rattling off about three different selections from the menu. I make a more conservative request of just one drink for the time being.

With drinks and food ordered, the conversation turns back to me. Again. I still don't understand their interest entirely, but they ask how I've been, what

I have been up to, and how the degree is going. They even remember I'm about to sit for exams for my next to last semester and which classes I'm taking. I'm honestly surprised and flattered they paid so much attention at all.

I still feel bad that they always seem to center so much on me, though. I care about them, too, and want to know how their lives are going, but when I try to ask, they always deflect my questions. The now-finished tour proves a safe topic since they've already talked about that with me through our text conversations. But anything about *them*, certainly about being demons, gets turned away.

That sort of information isn't privy to human ears, I suppose, and there's always the possibility that maybe they're right, maybe I really don't want to know. It still stings a little. As flattering as it is to have so much of their attention, I wish they could share more of themselves.

The arrival of our food serves as a distraction. Of course, it should have been obvious by this point that Elias would never take us anywhere that didn't meet his standards, but I'm still pleasantly surprised. The food is *good*.

"Mmm. I forgot why eating out is so great." I sigh contentedly.

"How d'you forget?" Caelan laughs, quite happily shoveling his own meal into his mouth. "The eats are the only good thing about it."

"Look, I don't get out much, okay? The last time I went out somewhere nice for a meal was when I was with you guys last, actually."

Elias gives a low, pleased hum. "Well, I'm glad to hear that."

I glance at him. "How come?"

"It would have made the situation unpleasant if you had been seeing anyone else in our absence." He keeps his tone light, but something about the statement, the possessive way he's looking at me, makes the hairs rise on my arms. My heart skips a beat.

I shouldn't be okay with that. There's no official arrangement between us, not one that has ever been stated. Even if I accepted the status of our relationship as being friends with benefits, no one mentioned anything about

being exclusive. I doubt Elias and Caelan are. I can't, *shouldn't*, spend my entire life hanging around waiting for a couple of goddamn demons who I might only see once in a blue moon. I can't put my existence on hold for them. If I *had* happened to go on a date in the meantime, that was my prerogative.

Except I hadn't. I've been so hung up on them that I haven't even looked at anyone else since.

"Why? You wouldn't be jealous about it, would you?" I ask quietly. Because that's what it feels like.

Elias' eyes darken, and his hand grips my knee beneath the table. "I believe *we* have a claim on you first." Though he keeps his voice soft and conversational, a minefield of danger lurks beneath the calm waters.

I swallow. I really am a head-over-heels *idiot*. Because of all the conclusions I could take away from that statement, my brain decides to fixate on the fact Elias considers me to be theirs. That they have a *claim* on me makes my breath catch in my throat, my pulse quickening.

It's a terrible thing to want, but I *do*. I've wanted it from the first moment they started flirting with me. And I can't deny it's been a huge component of many of my fantasies ever since.

To belong to them.

Elias caring enough to get jealous over me? A *demon* being possessive of me? That should be terrifying. So why the hell am I almost honored instead?

I can see exactly how stupid it is and exactly how dangerous it could be, but I'm in too deep to want to stop.

"I haven't seen anyone," I reassure him, entirely genuine. "It didn't even occur to me, honestly. How could I ever think about anyone else after being with you?"

That seems to satisfy Elias, though the intensity about him doesn't lessen. It shifts from a dangerous power to the sort of intensity that makes me feel like, if we weren't in public, he'd be seconds away from shoving me against

the nearest wall and kissing me until I was breathless.

His grip loosens, but he doesn't take his hand off my knee.

Never one to be left out of the action, Caelan shifts closer and snakes a casual arm around my waist.

I must duck my head to hide the smile and blush on my face as if I'm only focusing on finishing my meal. Jealous, maybe, but they can be kind of sweet when they're so casually affectionate.

Even though the main course was plenty, Elias talks me into sharing dessert. I should have caught on the moment he said 'sharing,' really.

He orders white chocolate bread pudding that comes with ice cream and berries. The opportunity for him to feed me by hand is apparently too great to be passed up as he picks up a strawberry and teasingly presses it against my lips.

My face is heating up from being embarrassed and rapidly becoming flustered, but I might as well own it. I meet Elias' eyes and run my tongue over his fingers as I take the strawberry from him, and it's worth it for the way his eyes darken with lust.

"You two are sickening," Caelan notes.

"Are you jealous?" Elias asks offhandedly. "I can feed you too, if you would like."

The suggestion makes me laugh, but Caelan only smirks expectantly in return. And to my surprise, Elias follows through on the offer. I get a front-row view as Elias places another of the berries against Caelan's lips. Only Caelan doesn't just lick Elias' fingers. He swallows the berry, then takes the whole of Elias' thumb into his mouth, sucking on it like it's something else. For an unnecessarily long time. His teeth graze against Elias' skin as he curls his inhumanly long tongue around Elias' thumb one last time before letting it slide from his mouth with an obscene popping noise.

I'm pretty sure both Elias and I are turned on by that, and from the grin on Caelan's face, he damn well knows it.

“All right, just go and one-up me then,” I eventually find enough voice to mutter, shifting slightly in my seat.

Caelan cackles. The hand around my waist slides up my spine, guiding me closer in. Close enough that he can kiss me, very thoroughly, and with all the same attention he was sucking Elias’ thumb with.

“Is this going to happen every time I try to take you two out for a nice meal?” Elias sighs. “Caelan. Decorum.”

Sharp teeth tug at my bottom lip, then Caelan breaks away from the kiss. “You weren’t complaining about decorum a second ago. And I bet you wouldn’t be complaining about decorum if I got under the table and started blowing you right about now.”

“Um... the table is made of glass,” I point out, a little breathless. Not that I would mind having *that* view, but it’s hardly the most subtle thing to do.

The corner of Elias’ mouth twitches, somewhere between amusement and annoyance, but he’s notably quick to flag down our waitress, requesting the bill.

We pay and make our way downstairs without further incident. Caelan is remarkably well-behaved, content to loop his arm around my waist again while I lean into him, and Elias holds my hand on my other side.

Rather than taking the most direct route, we cross the road and walk through the square, nosily examining the event that’s happening there. The main attraction is a temporary ice-skating rink that’s been set up, surrounded by twinkling festive lights.

It’s cute, but I have little inclination to partake in unplanned activities like ice skating. And, more pressingly, I can’t imagine Elias or Caelan wanting to ice skate, either.

Although—

I snort, then break out into laughter. Both turn to look at me.

“Sorry! I had a dumb thought.”

Elias raises an eyebrow, silently encouraging me to elaborate.

I cover my mouth to muffle my giggles. It's dumb, it really is, but I can't help but remember Caelan's predilection for sharp objects. I point at the ice skates. "I thought... Caelan might like ice skating. 'Cause knife shoes."

"*Knife shoes,*" Caelan repeats.

Elias maintains his usual composed demeanor, but he squeezes my hand, and I get the impression from the tilt of his head and the tiniest shake to his shoulders that he's trying very hard not to laugh.

Caelan huffs. "If you think I wouldn't slash someone across the throat with one of those, you're very wrong."

"Just with an ice skate in your hand or while wearing them?" I ask.

"Either."

That statement only makes me laugh harder. I don't doubt he would in the slightest, and as horribly morbid as it is, that only makes the whole mental image even more amusing.

"I-I'm sorry," I wheeze. "I just. Pictured it with like... a pirouette and a high kick, and I-I... That's not that funny. I'm sorry."

I even get a snort and a laugh from Elias with that one, ineffectively hidden by a cough.

"You're lucky you're cute," Caelan grumbles, but he doesn't seem overly annoyed. In fact, he appears to put a bit too much consideration into the idea, a wickedly amused look in his eye, although he's doing his best not to let Elias see it. I really hope I haven't given him any kind of inspiration.

He leans over and lightly bites my ear, tugging the shell with his teeth. I'm not even sure if it's meant to be teasing retribution or simply affectionate, but either way, it makes me laugh lightly again, and I stick my tongue out at him.

I'm still grinning as the three of us reenter the hotel. Rather than lead us back to the elevators and our room, Elias guides us further along the main corridor toward the ceiling-high, arched windows at the far end. There's a staircase, only a few steps high but wide, carpeted in red, leading up to a set

of massive, carved wooden doors.

“Shall we?” he asks, gesturing toward the room.

I cast a questioning glance in Elias’ direction, and he smiles. “I believe I promised you a dance.”

He opens the door, offering me his hand, and we step into the ballroom together.

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Chapter Eight

The room inside is all high ceilings and arched bays, balconies set into each archway and surrounded by draped curtains. Long banquet tables are lined down the center of the room, surrounded by circular tables draped in fine white tablecloths. The stage at the back of the room is surprisingly small, given what I've imagined the room will be used for tomorrow evening and dwarfed by the marble dance floor surrounding it. It is a true ballroom rather than designed for performances.

"This room was used for important awards ceremonies in the earlier days of Hollywood," Elias explains.

That sort of thing is over my head, but it looks fancy, that much I can tell.

"Shall we?" Elias says, offering me his hand.

I glance back at Caelan, who lets his arm slide from my waist. He pulls a face. "Ain't my thing, but you have fun or whatever."

"I theoretically know how this goes, but I've never actually danced with anyone in practice," I warn Elias. But I take his hand regardless, and he pulls me in against him. Close. Closer than any of the instructional demonstrations I'd watched. His other hand slides around my waist, and I place my hand on his shoulder.

"I will give you any guidance you need," Elias says. "Although technique is hardly a concern. This is purely for enjoyment."

“Yours or mine?” I ask teasingly.

Elias’ reply is serious, though. “Both,” he says smoothly. “And I intend to make sure you do enjoy this. Very much.”

I’m not entirely sure if he’s talking about the dancing anymore.

He starts us off slowly, with simple waltz steps to let me get the hang of it. It’s easy enough to fall into the rhythm of it, letting him lead as we slowly, steadily make our way in small circles around the dance floor.

I relax into it. It’s nice. A little old-fashioned, cliché almost, and not something I thought I’d ever have the chance or even want to do. But it suits Elias.

There’s something quietly thrilling about it. As Elias had said, technique was hardly the goal here. From what I remember of the instructions, we were supposed to keep our elbows high, but Elias decides to forgo that in favor of simply holding me closer. There’s an elegance, an understated grace perhaps on his part more than mine, and simple pleasure in being held against his chest.

I rest my head against him, burying my face into the crook of his neck, and he raises his hand to tangle it gently in my hair, holding me like that.

“Now that you have the hang of the basics, shall we try a little more?” he suggests.

While I was enjoying the intimacy of slow dancing together, there’s a hint of something wicked in his voice that intrigues me.

I nod, then immediately laugh in delight as Elias dips me.

There’s no chance of keeping up with any sort of recognizable steps now. Elias moves far faster than before, and I *think* I manage to follow with a reasonable amount of grace, especially given I don’t really know what I’m doing. I have no option but to surrender entirely to Elias’ lead. He lifts and spins me through the air like I weigh nothing at all, and dammit, it makes my heart skip. I was always such a sucker for casual displays of strength like that.

It's dizzying and leaves me breathless, but it's *fun*. He spins me around, pulling me back against him so our bodies are pressed flush together, faces so close I could easily lean in and kiss him. And, oh, I'm tempted, I'll admit it, but then he smirks before gripping my hips and raising me into the next lift.

"Elias!" I say, half in protest, half laughing. He's obviously showing off.

He slows us back down to a steady pace, swaying together. "Do you want to stop?" he asks.

"No, but..." I glance over to the tables at the edge of the dance floor. Caelan has sequestered a chair, sitting draped over the back of it as he watches Elias and me. His expression is bored detachment, but I feel he's putting it on to cover something else. I feel bad about leaving him out.

"You sure you don't want a turn, Caelan?"

Caelan snorts. "I ain't doing that. Besides, the view from here is *real* nice." A wide smirk crosses his face.

It occurs to me that this dress is on the shorter side, and with its style, it tends to flare out rather easily. Sometimes even the lightest gust of wind is enough to blow it up. And with all the spinning and lifts Elias was doing... Normally I'd wear cycling shorts underneath so I don't have to worry about that, but I didn't bother this time. Because maybe I wouldn't complain overly much if it was Elias and Caelan I ended up flashing my lingerie to.

Which is apparently exactly what I've been doing.

I smooth down the dress and shoot a half-hearted glare at him. It's embarrassing to have him call me out on it, but if it gets him grinning crookedly at me with that heated look in his eyes, I don't really mind at all. "You could've mentioned that earlier," I mutter, cheeks reddening a touch.

He only laughs. "Why? Might as well have some fun while you're all enamored with Elias."

That moment of heat vanishes again, and I wonder if he is jealous at being left out. So, I drop the matter, leaving Elias' side and going over to take Caelan's hands in my own. "Come and dance," I insist.

“I already told you I don’t know that ballroom shit.”

“That doesn’t matter. You can just stand there and sway from side to side with me for all I care, but I don’t like leaving you out.”

Caelan laughs again, but it’s got a softer edge than usual. “You’re cute.”

I tug him out of his seat and drag him to the dance floor, an action I only get away with because Caelan is amused enough to allow me to boss him around that way. Despite his claims of knowing nothing, he settles quite comfortably into an embrace. My arms wrapped around his neck as his hands settled on my waist.

He gives a hum of consideration. “I dunno fuck all about the fancy footwork shit, but if you want to be tossed about, I can do that for you.”

“Maybe.” It is thrilling how much strength they have, how they can so easily pick me up and throw me around. “But this is nice for now.”

Being held in his arms, close enough I can faintly hear the echo of his heartbeat, I shift my feet, trying to lead into some of the steps I’d been doing with Elias. Caelan raises his eyebrows, then rolls his eyes at me, but he obliges nonetheless.

Just small steps, turning in slow circles. And for a while, it’s nice. After a few long minutes of moving together, Caelan bores of slow and gentle.

The only warning I get is the flash of mischief in Caelan’s eyes and a sudden smirk before he dips me. I gasp and giggle. Then Caelan kisses me because he has to do something to one-up Elias.

My fingers clutch tighter at the back of his shirt, moaning softly as his lips press insistently against mine. “Ah, Caelan...”

“Is that romantic enough for you yet?”

I grin. “Very, but you don’t have to be romantic for me if you’re not comfortable with it.”

His eyes narrow, and he pulls me closer to him. Every firm line of his body is pressed against mine. “Would you prefer I pin you up against the wall and fuck your mouth with my tongue? ’Cause that’s what I’d really like to do

with you,” he murmurs roughly against my ear, and my mouth goes dry.

Damn. I nod. That would also be very acceptable.

Caelan pulls back with a grin. Apparently, still determined not to be shown up completely by Elias, he tries a lift as well. Only his version is more like picking me up and tossing me boldly into the air, and I shriek, partially in surprise and maybe a bit of delight. It’s significantly higher than he has any right to be throwing anyone around, and he cackles as he catches me and spins me around.

“*Caelan!*”

Elias, watching on with amusement, takes that moment to cut in, possibly to stop Caelan from throwing me around like a rag doll. While my heart is most definitely in my throat after that, I’m almost a little disappointed I don’t get to do it again. It was exhilarating.

Elias meets my eyes and smiles, then offers his hand to Caelan.

Caelan stares at him. “What?”

“A dance?”

“Why? So, you can show me how to do it properly?” he asks, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “ ’Cause I really don’t care.”

“Not particularly,” Elias’ reply is mild. “Perhaps I would like to dance with you.”

Caelan’s eyebrows raise, and he snorts. “You know how that usually works out.”

“I know.” The purr of Elias’ voice says that is exactly what he wants.

I’m missing something. This is something between them. Of course, they have to have their own history. They’ve had Goëtica for several years, and God only knows how long they knew each other before that.

I step back, allowing them their moment. After all, they’re together too, and must have been long before I came into the picture. I still haven’t quite figured out the relationship between them, and I’m almost certain they don’t know themselves. There’s certainly plenty of sexual tension. Perhaps all of us

are just friends with benefits and extra feelings on the side that no one feels like addressing.

I don't mind taking over Caelan's seat at the side and watching for a while, because even watching them is incredible.

They don't go for the slower, more intimate style of waltz that Elias did with me. No, they're far more aggressive about it.

I don't know ballroom dancing very well, but I doubt they're strictly sticking to any one recognizable style anyway since Elias is the only one even potentially capable of doing so. It seems like more of a tango, with sharper lines and more dramatic flair. The tension is palpable.

Elias leads by the necessity of being the only one who knows the steps, but Caelan isn't ever content to follow. Any time Elias makes a more complicated move, throwing in a little spin or a dip, Caelan retaliates by taking over for a few steps and doing something similar to Elias in return.

Anyone watching might believe they didn't particularly like one another from the antagonistic nature of the way they dance together. Except that they never quite seem able to take their hands off each other, and the distance between their bodies is almost nonexistent.

There's definitely *some* kind of tension, all right.

The transition evolves so smoothly and so naturally that I can hardly even pin down where it happens, but at some point, it stops even being a dance. Probably around the point where Caelan's hand wraps around Elias' throat or when Elias doesn't dip Caelan so much as attempt to toss him to the ground.

It's either a very violent dance or a particularly graceful sparring match.

But Caelan is grinning, laughing as he throws Elias, almost the same way he threw me, only with the intent of slamming Elias into the wall instead.

I let out a small squeak of surprise. They've 'fought' in a few music videos before, where the narrative pitted them against each other, but I didn't realize they *actually* fought. Maybe I should have figured—demons and all.

But for all the violence behind it, there doesn't seem to be any ill intent. I

push the momentary flare of concern aside. The longer I watch, the more obvious it becomes. They're sparring.

They are practiced and familiar with each other's moves. It's not even fighting so much as *playing*. Maybe this is what they do, how they handle the tension.

They're clearly both enjoying it. And I get it, I think, seeing it in person like this. For them, it's *fun*—the play-fighting, the struggle. The way one of them will pin the other down, usually with notably far more physical contact than necessary, only for the other to break away and flip their positions.

This is far more Caelan's element, and they're clearly evenly matched. They're not *actually* trying to hurt one another. Even though it may seem a little rough from a human perspective, nothing they're doing would put a scratch on either of them. It's more like watching them wrestle in bed for dominance.

And that is a thought I now have in my head and can't let go.

I remember what Caelan said that first night we met about hate sex between him and Elias. I'd bet good money they *have* used sparring for exactly that purpose.

Yeah. This is foreplay for them. Their casual power, their grace, and their skill, it's breathtaking. And kind of hot.

It makes me squirm just watching them.

At the same time, I laugh to myself. I adore them, but they really are a pair of idiots. They can't just get it on like rational people who can admit to liking each other. There is too much pride for that. Instead, they have to be like *this*. But they're not complaining. I'm not, either.

In fact, it's almost kind of tempting.

Elias has Caelan pinned to the floor, a knee planted in his back, and a hand around the back of Caelan's neck. He's not paying attention to me at all.

Somehow, I walk over and wrap my arms around Elias from behind, pulling him off Caelan.

Well, I attempt to pull him off. As if I could physically drag Elias anywhere. But I have the leverage right and, far more importantly, the element of surprise. It shifts Elias enough for Caelan to wriggle free.

There's a moment of abrupt stillness as they both turn to stare at me in confusion.

Slowly, a wicked grin spreads over my face. This must be the stupidest thing I've ever done, but I blurt out, "I want in."

Elias raises an eyebrow, then a smile twitches at the corner of his mouth. "Be careful, darling. You might not want to pick sides," he says, a low purr in his voice, teasing, accepting me into the game.

"Or what?" I ask, only to yelp as he grasps each of my wrists. Then *I'm* the one pinned in place, up against one of the columns lining the room this time.

A shiver of arousal floods through me, rather than any kind of fear.

Caelan flips himself off the floor and, with Elias distracted, takes out Elias' legs and shoves him. Elias growls and lets me go as he's forced to focus on not stumbling.

Glancing at Caelan, I shoot him a grin, giggling, and we drag Elias down to the ground together. Somehow, I end up as the one straddled across Elias' lap, pressing him down. Only I'm hardly enough to keep Elias there. He flips me over instead, and I find myself in a very familiar position beneath him.

I let him think he has me for a minute. Or maybe it's more that I'm enjoying the moment too, squirming beneath him. Then I shift my legs and brace my feet, levering my hips up to throw him off.

It only works because he allows it to, going easy on me, letting me play along. I'm never going to get away, never going to win, but giving me a chance to struggle is much more fun.

Caelan tries to attack Elias from behind, but Elias grabs me and pulls me up with him. He spins me around dizzyingly, and I gasp as he pulls my arm behind my back with one hand, his other holding my throat. Like he's

holding me captive.

“I wouldn’t try anything, Caelan,” Elias says smoothly.

It’s enough to get Caelan to hesitate. He glances at me a moment, unsure.

I narrow my eyes at Caelan, a silent instruction to be ready. Then I hook my foot around the back of Elias’ knee and kick hard enough to make it buckle. Not the best move, given it makes both of us topple forward, but Elias releases me, and I stumble out of his grip, ending up at Caelan’s feet instead.

Caelan scoops me up in a bridal hold, and I yelp in protest.

“Oh, hey, was this your hostage?” Caelan asks with a wicked expression. He squeezes my shoulder in warning before throwing me directly and damn forcefully into Elias.

Elias, still regaining his balance, catches me, but at the expense of absorbing the force of it, slamming us back against the wall together.

“Holy shit,” I gasp, breathless and exhilarated. My heart is pounding in my ears, but I giggle delightedly. Elias only grunts.

I wriggle out of his grip to make room for Caelan to come in and take down Elias. But instead of going for Elias, Caelan wraps his arm around my waist.

Squeaking in mock betrayal, I squirm in his hold. Then, knowing it’s never going to work, I let all my weight drop. Caelan could hold me fine, and we both know it, but he’s being lenient. Same as Elias.

He lets me drag him down, grab his arm, and flip him forward over my shoulder.

A laugh bursts out of him. “You’re quite the troublemaker, ain’t ya?” he says, sprawled on the floor and grinning like he had every intention of being there.

I give him a triumphant smile in return and scramble back to my feet, only to turn and run straight into Elias. He grabs me, pulling me against him, face to face, his arm around my back like an iron vice.

“She really is.” Elias purrs.

The close contact immediately makes my face heat up. The length of his body is flush against mine, and he’s into this little game too. I *knew* it. His growing hardness presses into my hip. Then his other hand slides down my thigh, and my breath catches.

“E-Elias...”

The idea of play-fighting slips from my mind. Some part of me knew from watching them that this was how their idea of a ‘fight’ ended. With the loser being pinned down and the winner—winners, plural, in this case—doing filthy things to them.

They may have been toying with me, letting me have some minor victories to make the game more even, but I was always playing to lose.

Elias smirks, leaning in so his lips ghost against mine. He’s not even kissing me properly, but the promise of it, along with my already racing heart, the thrill of it all, makes my knees feel weak. “Why are you fighting us, darling?”

I swallow, having to take a moment to remember how to speak. “ ’Cause you two were doing it, and it looked like fun. It’s hot. A bit of pretend struggle or whatever. Um...”

His hand is beneath my skirt now, high enough to toy with the lace of my panties.

“You could have been hurt.”

“You were holding back enough not to hurt each other. I trusted both of you enough not to hurt me. And you didn’t.”

Elias chuckles, perhaps a touch coldly. “You put too much faith in creatures you don’t understand.”

“I put my faith in *you*.”

It’s an oddly serious conversation to have while he’s feeling me up.

Caelan sidles up behind us, and his lips press against the back of my neck. “So. You like playing like this too, huh?”

“Mmm... maybe.”

Elias’ fingers follow the line of my panties, between my legs, and I groan as he lightly rubs against me. I’d been so preoccupied with the play-fighting that I hadn’t appreciated it at the time, but the way Elias had pinned me, the intensity of being held down like that, really was arousing.

I’m turned on enough to be fairly slick already, and Elias’ wandering fingers are doing nothing to help the situation. “It seems you *do* like it,” he notes, a touch of smugness in his voice.

I shiver at the contact, heat pooling in my belly. God. After the date, dancing, and experimenting with them like that, I need more. I need him to kiss me, touch me.

Now. Please.

But Elias doesn’t. He’s looking at me with desire clouding his eyes like he wants it just as badly as I do, but then he steels himself. “I think we need to talk.”

“What?”

“We should go back up to the room.”

I entirely understand going somewhere private because it’s obvious exactly where the evening is progressing. But to talk? He sounds so damn serious.

Elias releases me, and I smooth my dress down again, face warm. I share a glance with Caelan. “That sounds like a not-good talk... did I do something wrong?” I ask.

“Nah. He gets grumpy when he has blue balls.” Caelan snorts.

“Well, we could go upstairs and *not* talk to help with that.”

Caelan laughs at my forwardness, and even Elias softens, giving a quiet chuckle. “Unfortunately, there won’t be time for me to partake in any such activities before my meeting.”

“Dammit,” I blurt out before I can catch myself.

“Quite,” Elias agrees. “But no, not a bad talk. However, if you want to

start playing rough with us, we need to have a proper conversation about your limits and what safe words you would prefer. Important details like that.”

“*Oh.*”

It’s not as though the issue has never come up before. More like we’ve danced around it. The first time I was with them, Caelan and I had explicitly agreed that knife play was something we’d want to try, and Elias had briefly mentioned a few things I would be very interested in doing. It had also come up in our text conversations, with the direction some of the more heated ones went.

It’s not as though I don’t already have a decent idea of what they’re into. And they certainly know what I’m keen on, but Elias is right. We’ve never had the chance to properly sit down and talk that sort of thing through.

The idea makes me a little nervous again, and I find myself wringing the hem of my dress as the three of us make our way to the elevator and back upstairs.

Good nervous.

Excited nervous.

If we *need* to have a serious conversation about it, they probably want to move things from playing and teasing to actually bringing some real kink into whatever this relationship of ours is.

My heart flutters in my chest. *God, the elevator is taking far too long.*

I pinch my thigh to remind myself to pay attention and take a deep breath. *Focus.* Don’t overthink this, get carried away, or do anything else stupid. Getting myself all worked up and turned on again by imagining what they could do to me will not help the situation.

We’re just going to talk.

Back in the room, Elias directs us to sit apart from each other, not trusting Caelan’s wandering hands, even though technically, *Elias* is the only one who’s been significantly feeling me up recently. Caelan perches on the edge of the bed while Elias takes the chair from the desk. I turn the armchair to

face them, kicking my boots off so I can curl my legs up and settle into it.

Honestly, I don't even know where to start. It's not that I'm not comfortable with them or the idea of this. It's not that in the slightest. It's just that—well—is there *any* way to announce what sort of kinky things you'd like someone to do to you for the first time that isn't a little awkward? Not when we're sitting to talk about it all seriously.

Elias leans over to touch the back of my hand. I start slightly, so caught up in my thoughts I didn't notice him moving at first. "There's no need to feel self-conscious," he says reassuringly.

"Oh. I'm fine. I'm trying to figure out a way to phrase 'please tie me up and spank me' so that it doesn't sound thirsty as fuck."

Caelan cackles hard enough that he rocks backward with laughter. "I love having you around."

I can feel my face heating, so I give them a small laugh to cover it. "That was a joke to break the tension," I clarify. Maybe. It kind of slipped out without me thinking about it. "Though, uh, not that I *wouldn't* want to do that. It was the first dumb thing that popped into my head. You could. If you wanted to. I think I'd kind of like that. You know what? I'm going to stop talking now."

"You're adorable," Caelan says.

Elias twines his fingers with mine and squeezes my hand before drawing away with an affectionate, amused smile. "That's as good a place to start as any. How about we go through the more standard kinks to begin with, and you can inform us of your position on each?" Although his tone remains serious, there's a glint in his eyes that I swear means he's teasing me. "You appear to have some interest in bondage?" he suggests.

"Yes." I clear my throat. I didn't mean to come across quite so enthusiastic. "Um... yes. I'd be interested in that."

"What type? Rope? Cuffs? Shackles? More complex shibari styles, or simply for the purpose of holding you in place during sex?"

“Oh. Jeez.” I’ve never put *that* much thought into it. “Any of those sound good, honestly, but... I guess what I’ve thought about most would be having my wrists tied to a headboard, that sort of thing? I’d like that a lot.”

Elias shares a look with Caelan. “I’m certain that could be arranged,” he says. “Any limits?”

I shake my head. “I... don’t think so, not for bondage. Maybe worth noting my circulation is kinda shitty at the best of times? I can get pins and needles easily if I stay in the wrong position for too long. Is that the sort of information you need?”

“That’s perfect, darling. We’ll be sure to take care, in that case.”

“I don’t think it’d be a big issue. It’s never bothered me before when I... I mean, it’s more just I can’t stay kneeling for very long, mainly.”

Caelan catches the slip and raises an eyebrow. “When what?” he prompts, grinning wolfishly.

I pause. There’s really no need to be embarrassed. The whole point of this conversation is to be honest about what we want, isn’t it?

“I’ve tried tying myself up,” I admit. “A few times.”

“Is that so?” He purrs. “And what *else* have you tried while you’re all alone?”

Elias interrupts, thankfully, before I’m obliged to answer. “Caelan, I think we’re straying a little from the point here.”

“It could be relevant,” Caelan defends, with a shrug and another heated grin in my direction.

Elias shakes his head. “Was it rope you used?” he asks, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s referring to the self-bondage.

“Oh. Yeah. I ordered a length of proper bondage rope online one time, and a silk tie I found. Why? And Caelan, stop *looking* at me like that.”

“Useful to know what you already have experience with and are certain you enjoy.”

That makes sense.

The curve of Elias' smile turns mildly suggestive. "You also mentioned spanking," he says. "What about impact play?"

Ah. Right. The spanking thing. "I... look. I'm not a huge masochist or anything, but a bit of pain can be fun." I swallow. "Very fun. I like to get roughed up. Though, uh... what exactly do you mean by impact play?" The term is a rather broad one.

"Any blunt instrument used to cause an impact on the body. Ranging from hands, such as in the case of spanking, to implements such as paddles, canes, riding crops, floggers, and potentially repurposed everyday objects such as rulers or belts."

The list is enough to be a little overwhelming. It's not that I haven't thought about it a *lot*, given I've known for years where my tastes lean, but I have never actually been in a relationship where anything of this depth was relevant. Elias clearly knows far more than I do.

I consider it for a moment. "None of those would be hard limits, but... take it slow and ease me in on any of the harder stuff like canes?"

"Yeah, canes can bite like a bitch," Caelan comments idly.

The way he says it implies he's very much speaking from experience. "When did you get caned?"

Caelan smirks. "Doll, we've done a lot. Caning is tame. And..." he jerks his thumb toward Elias, "... edgelord asshole over here has a bit of a discipline schtick sometimes."

"I will keep that in mind."

"There's no need to be concerned about that. After all, I'm sure you will behave far better than Caelan for me, won't you, dear?" Elias says, with a low purr that makes my stomach flip.

"Y-yes, Sir."

Not that it'd be hard to achieve that. I can only imagine Caelan would be a total brat if he ever subbed at all.

"Ah, speaking of... you're under no obligation to, if you prefer

masochism alone, but is that the sort of dynamic that would interest you? One of dominance and submission?”

God, yes. I want both of them to dominate the hell out of me. There’s a needy whine in my voice as I answer, “*Please.*”

“You already seem to be inclined to call me Sir, it appears.” Elias looks rather pleased with this fact.

“Is that the title you’d prefer?” I ask. “Master is good too. I’d be happy to call you that.”

Elias chuckles, lust flashing in his eyes. “Caelan’s right. You really are rather adorable. It would be quite the sight, having you on your knees begging for your Master.”

Oh, dammit. I was supposed to be focusing and having a serious conversation, not getting turned on again from hearing Elias talk about things like that in his damn *voice*, all low and deep and sensual. I bite my lip and press my thighs together.

Caelan snorts. “Now who’s the one getting off topic?”

Elias waves a dismissive hand but returns to whatever mental checklist he’s going through. Whatever else he may be, he’s certainly very thorough. And as frustrating as it is to just sit here and talk, it’s also reassuring, in a way, that he’s taking such care to get to know what my boundaries are, what I’d enjoy most. And this is for the ‘simpler’ kinks.

We cover all manner of things—blindfolds, gags, collars, sensory deprivation, temperature play, and verbal degradation, which is the only one I turn down. Dirty talk is fine, but I prefer it used for praise over any too-harsh humiliation. Then we move on to overstimulation, orgasm denial, and various potential sex toys. Being treated roughly, pinned down and manhandled... discussing that one makes me laugh since, *yeah*, I absolutely loved the play-fighting from earlier. Markings as well. Elias checks if I want to let them leave bruises, hickeys, and scratches on me, which I most definitely do. The idea of being all marked up by them thrills me to the core.

“And wounds that break the skin, shallow cuts, or such like?” Elias follows up with.

“What, like with knives?” Caelan butts in pointedly, notably perking up.

“Yes, yes. This is your territory.”

Caelan looks at me intently all of a sudden, and I squirm in my seat. “Yes. Please.”

I take a moment to lick my lips. I agreed to knife play last time, and it suddenly occurs to me that Elias needs to leave for his meeting at some point. It’ll be just Caelan and me for the night, and damn. I need to pay attention and talk about this thought seriously because there’s every chance it’s going to happen.

Okay, I can negotiate this.

“Hard limit is any serious bodily harm of the kind that might need actual medical treatment or whatever. I don’t like sharp objects that go deep. Needles are unsettling to me for that reason, and I wouldn’t want it with a knife either.”

“I gotcha, doll.”

Nodding, I continue, “You can cut me, make me bleed. I’d like that, as long as it’s shallow. The surface layers of skin are fine but not deep enough to scar permanently or anything. Um...” It’s hard to keep my thoughts straight when every part of me wants to go over to Caelan and beg him to pin me down and cut me up. “I’ll need to keep the marks covered, so nowhere that’ll be too difficult to hide. No face or hands.”

At least since it’s winter, it is mild enough, even in southern California, that I can get away with wearing long-sleeved tops or hoodies. So that won’t cause too much of an issue.

“You cool if I happen to kiss or lick the cuts after?” Caelan says lightly, but something about his tone feels like he’s very much hoping I’ll say yes. I grin.

“Yeah. I’d like that. I mean, if it’s safe? With the blood?”

Caelan laughs. “You really think beings as powerful as we are would ever be bothered by any human diseases or shit? We can’t catch anything from you. You can’t catch anything from us.”

I swallow, trying to shove aside the mental images of that *tongue* of his curling against the bloodied wounds, his lips stained red. *Fuck*. Maybe it’s not just a knife kink he’s got me hooked on but a goddamn blood kink as well.

Elias can see how badly my focus is wavering. We’ve talked long enough about the minor details of kinks. “What about aftercare?” he prompts.

I pause for a moment, wrenching my attention back. “Oh. Right. I’m not actually sure. I’ve never really done a real scene or anything in-depth enough to warrant that. Last time was really good, though. Getting to have a bath with Caelan, being held for a bit. I guess I’d like that again?”

“Caelan?”

Caelan directs his reply to me, “ ’Course, if I cut you up, I’ll take care of you afterward. I’m not that much of a dick.”

“What about you?” I ask, and the two of them share a small frown of confusion.

“Uh, us?” Caelan says.

“Do you need me to do anything for you afterward? Like, for aftercare?”

Caelan snorts, then laughs. “Shannon, we’re demons.”

“Doesn’t mean you don’t have feelings,” I maintain.

“I don’t think we require any care, darling,” Elias says, but softly. He’s not laughing like Caelan is. “However, that is sweet of you to take it into consideration.”

I catch Elias’ eyes. I can’t read his expression at all, something utterly unfathomable in the depths of his gaze, but the intensity with which he’s looking at me makes my heart jolt. He looks like he’s moments away from pinning me down and kissing me senseless or making love to me until I forget how to speak. Just having him staring at me like that, trapped beneath

his gaze, is already enough to have me grow flustered and breathless.

He's looked at me with plenty of lust before, but this is, *damn*.

"You two done eye-sexing?" Caelan interrupts.

I finally manage to break the eye contact, turning away and coughing, trying to cover how much of an effect that look alone was having on me.

"A-anyway," I stutter.

Elias smiles. "Safe words. Do you have any preferences?"

"Not really. Just the traffic light system would be okay by me."

"That's fine." He nods before gesturing for me to continue. "Would you be so kind as to define each of your colors for us, just to ensure we are all on the same page?"

"Green for everything's good, please continue. Yellow to pause things briefly and talk it through if there's an issue or something that needs changing or addressing, red to immediately end the scene," I reel off.

Elias seems satisfied with that. "Perfect." He glances at Caelan.

"Works for me."

That seems to be everything for the time being. There's still so much more we could cover, but we've been talking for a long time already, and the impatience builds into something difficult to bear. I just *want them*.

Elias gestures me over, and I nearly stumble in my enthusiasm to climb into his lap. He takes hold of my hips and drags me against him, his own impatience showing in the roughness of his grip and the harshness of his kiss as he finally brings our lips together.

It steals my breath away immediately. One of Elias' hands stays on my hip while the other lifts to cup the back of my neck and pull me close. His lips are so firm and insistent, so damn passionate.

That's the best word for it.

Both Caelan and Elias have kissed me plenty before, and I've always thoroughly enjoyed it, but those kisses were on a scale from affectionate to pure lust and need. I've never doubted they want me physically.

But passionately? That's new.

It makes my heart ache, and I can't even place why. I don't *want* to because that's the last thing I have the mental capacity to consider when Elias' tongue is inside my mouth doing the most deliciously sinful things, and my brain feels like it's short-circuiting. Everything I've been trying to hold back, all the arousal at the thought of the things we could do together, comes flooding back.

Oh, God.

"Elias." I moan. "Elias, please..."

My arms are wrapped around his shoulders, kissing him back with equal intensity. I rock in his lap, trying to grind down, but Elias growls, tightening his grip on my hip to stop me.

He lets the kiss linger a moment longer, then draws back with a terse sigh. "Meeting," he says.

"Fuck."

Elias huffs a short laugh of agreement, somewhere between amusement and annoyance. The latter isn't directed at me, though, just the situation in general.

He picks me up and places me on the bed next to Caelan, doing his best to smooth his suit down. "I was planning to shower before leaving, but unfortunately, our discussion took longer than anticipated."

"Sorry—" I begin.

"Don't be. Time much better spent." He turns his attention to Caelan. "Treat her well," is all he says.

"Oh, I will." Caelan purrs.

"We may have slightly different definitions of 'well,'" I mutter under my breath. Even though that was the whole point of such a long, in-depth conversation, so we *didn't* have different definitions of it. But the opportunity for snark was too good to pass up, and Caelan laughs.

Elias kisses me again, briefly but no less hotly, then does the same to

Caelan before nodding curtly and abruptly storming out the door.

Caelan's grinning like there's no tomorrow. "Hoo boy, I do not envy the execs having to deal with *that*," he says. "You probably shouldn't have wound him up like that right before leaving."

"Firstly, that was in no way my fault. *He* kissed *me*. Secondly, you would have absolutely done the same thing, and on purpose. Don't even try to deny it."

He doesn't. He just laughs and swings his leg over my lap, lightly shoving me back down onto the bed. His smile shifts from one of amusement to something far more predatory, and it makes my breath catch in my throat.

"Just you and me, doll." He takes the zipper of my dress and slowly drags it down, never taking his eyes from mine. "So, tell me. What do you want to do?"

Chapter Nine

What do I want to do?

That's cute. He knows. We both know.

"Caelan—" I cut off into a moan as he rolls his hips against mine, and I can feel how hard he is through his jeans. It seems I'm not the only one who got a little too interested in the things we were talking about.

It's almost tempting to forget all the kink talk and negotiation and just fuck him right here and now. But at the same time...

"I want to try it. The knife-play thing. Please," I murmur.

He brushes his fingers along my jaw, then trails them down the newly exposed skin revealed by my unzipped dress. The tips of his clawed fingernails graze between my breasts and down to my stomach. Even that much sensation is enough to make me shiver, hairs rising on my arms. It has me imagining what it would be like with the tip of a knife. I want that, the threat of it, the bite of the blade digging into me.

It's kind of messed up if I think about it too much—more than kind of. The first time I saw Caelan in one of Goëtica's music videos, and *many* times after, he'd murdered and tortured people with that knife. Just actors. Just for show. Yet, at the same time, I have no doubt he's done all of it for real before. Maybe before he was trapped here. Maybe since.

He could have used that knife to kill people, and I'm still here getting

turned on at the thought of him fucking me while he holds the blade against my throat.

It's the thrill of it, the idea of fear laced with excitement, pain blurring with pleasure. Being at his mercy. Knowing what he's capable of but still trusting him not to push me further than I can handle, all caution and better judgment thrown to the wind.

When he kisses me, it's every bit as heated and needy as the kiss I shared with Elias.

My fingers are trembling as I clutch at Caelan's shoulders. He can tell and doesn't stop his deep, demanding kisses until I relax against him.

Until the only tremble running through my body is one of arousal.

No nerves. No going back. Well, unless I say 'red,' but I really don't want to.

Caelan finally draws back, his eyes glazed as he grins down hungrily. "Did you want me to tie you up too? Wrists to the headboard, was it?"

I can only nod, dazed and out of breath.

He slows down for a moment, and that's probably a good thing. *Shit. I need to calm down.* Just relax and enjoy what's going to come, and not only be thinking about getting in his pants straightaway.

Caelan unzips my dress the rest of the way, helping me sit for a moment so he can slide the straps from my shoulders. He takes a long moment to appreciate what I'm wearing underneath—the matching black lace bra, panties, garter belt, and fishnets. "Cute," he reiterates.

When he snaps the strap of my garter belt, I giggle.

They must go, though. Caelan needs access to my thighs. He slides the fishnets off, unhooks my bra, and pulls that away before laying me back down on the bed.

He kisses the underside of my jaw, teeth grazing against my throat. "I do appreciate this, doll," he murmurs.

"Huh?"

“That you’d let me play with you like this.”

I grin. “I mean, it’s not like I don’t get to enjoy it too,” I point out.

His hands wander across my exposed skin, slowly exploring. He cups one of my breasts, gently rolling the nipple between his fingers and pinching it to make me gasp and squirm for a moment. “Not too many people would let a sadistic demon with a knife loose on ’em.”

“I don’t have much sense of self-preservation.”

Caelan snorts, and I shoot a heated, teasing grin back at him. “Shuffle up,” he commands, and I do so, shifting further up onto the bed so my hands can reach the bars of the headboard.

He kisses me briefly again, then vanishes from the bed. When he returns, two short coils of rope are in his hands, and he lays the ornate dagger that he seems to favor on the covers beside me.

“But for real,” I say, softer now. He’s leaning over me, focusing on tying my wrists rather than looking at my face, but I look up at him. “I trust you.”

“I’m going to hurt you.”

“I want you to.”

“Why?”

“Um... masochism?”

With both my wrists tied to the headboard, he finally glances back down and meets my eyes. “I meant, why would you trust me? Seems a stupid thing to do.” His tone is still light, pointedly dismissive, but there’s an edge of something odd, almost vulnerable in it. That means the conversation is in dangerous territory.

“Because I like you, and I care about you.”

“You really shouldn’t,” he says, voice hardening.

There’s a faint crackle of electricity, a sharp snarl in the back of his throat. Then the knife is in Caelan’s hand. He swings it down in a vicious arc, aiming for my jugular, and oh, fuck, *fuck*. I can’t fight human instinct. Fear and adrenaline flood through me, and my breath catches in my throat, but I

don't flinch or pull away. He stops barely an inch away, then gently presses the edge of the blade against my throat like a caress.

It takes everything I have not to shake, pulse racing.

"I could murder you. I could slit your throat just like this. I could cut your chest open and tear out your heart."

My heart already feels like it's going to pound out of my chest as it is. "But you won't."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then that's the hill I die on. But I'm not taking it back."

Caelan hesitates, his fingers twitching on the hilt of his knife. "Only a goddamn human could..." he mutters to himself. He lets the knife slip from his grip, falling back to the covers, and he takes my face between his hands and kisses me instead.

It's immediately deep, messy, and thorough, so very, very thorough. Caelan's tongue maps out every inch of my mouth, savoring every sensitive spot until I'm trembling for him. His hand holds me softly by the throat. I'm certain he can feel my fluttering heartbeat.

I'm pinned beneath him, wrists bound above my head, almost entirely naked, apart from a pair of lacy panties that never really covered that much to start with, and he's still fully dressed. I'm so vulnerable for him like this, helpless, but that thrills me rather than scares me. Mostly.

It's also incredibly frustrating because I want more than anything to wrap my arms around him, but all I can do is tug at my restraints and squirm as he makes good on his promise from earlier to fuck my mouth with his tongue.

"Caelan," I whine.

He laughs against my lips and finally pulls away, smirking at my glazed eyes and flushed face.

I'm struggling to remember how to think because, *damn*, there was something important I meant to say. I know there was, but he's kind of broken my brain a little.

I swallow. “Wow. Okay.” I pause again, panting. “What the hell was all that about?”

Caelan raises an eyebrow. “It’s fun to kiss you?”

“Before that. The bit about threatening to murder me.”

His expression sours, and I regret bringing it back up when Caelan’s already provided such a lovely distraction. But it *was* kind of an asshole move, and I don’t feel like letting that kind of shit fly, demon or not.

“You’re *too* cute. You make me feel things, and I don’t fuckin’ like it,” he says, almost pouting.

I stare at him for a long moment, letting that sink in.

He’s—

He’s an idiot, oh my God. I laugh, and it sets my slightly frayed nerves at ease. It’s the same as when I was watching him with Elias. Caelan is utterly useless at admitting he likes someone without being antagonistic about it.

Demons probably aren’t meant to *like* people, I suppose. Does he think it’ll ruin his image or something?

Idiot. But I adore him.

Then there’s the other implication of his statement. That he *does* like me, feels something for me, and that makes my heart skip a beat. I’m not stupid. I know he doesn’t care as deeply as I do. I don’t know if he can. There might be limits to how much a demon can feel.

Are Elias and Caelan even capable of feeling love the same way as humans?

It doesn’t matter. He makes it sound as though he’s attached to me on some level, and I’ll take it.

My chest feels tight at the thought, but trying to work through the too-complicated, thorny mess that is how much I’m attached to *them* in return is not what I want to deal with right now. Not when I’m horny and mostly naked and tied up beneath him. So, I play it off.

“Jesus. Don’t try and scare people like that because you don’t want to

acknowledge maybe you *like* someone, you emotionally constipated, demonic trash fucker.”

Caelan looks so offended, not at the insult so much as the fact I insulted him at all, even so blatantly jokingly, that I break down into a fit of giggles.

“Oh, you are so gonna get it,” he growls out, but it’s back to being playful rather than any kind of serious threat. He looms over me, hands braced on either side of my shoulders, and I grin up at him with no repentance for calling him names.

Staring up at him like this, I want to kiss him again. I want to tangle my hands in his hair, pull him down, and makeout with him until I’m a needy mess.

The best I can do with my hands tied is lean up far enough to press my lips sweetly against his. Then I trail my mouth down to his neck and press a kiss there as well.

He has a scar there. I noticed he had a lot last time, but I never really got the opportunity to explore. Most of them are on his torso, covered by his shirt, but the one on his throat and a few along his arms are visible.

I wonder how he got them. Probably another one of those things they’d say isn’t relevant for me to know.

Now isn’t the time to ask about it, either. So instead, I kiss over the top of the scar, trailing my tongue along the length of it. It stretches along the side of his throat, diagonal and jagged as if it was torn by a claw, reaching up almost to the corner of his jaw.

That earns me a soft groan and the slightest buck of Caelan’s hips against mine. I giggle. That little spot, the corner of his jaw below his ear, is apparently sensitive. I nibble at the skin, not quite enough to leave a mark, but it’s clear it’s affecting him.

“Dammit.” Caelan hisses. “The hell you trying to do?”

I’m too preoccupied to answer. I kiss my way back along the scar, hot and open-mouthed this time, until Caelan shoves me harshly away.

“*Enough,*” he growls. His piercing yellow eyes show pure lust. “I’m the one who’s gonna be doing the fuckin’ teasing here.”

Despite the rough treatment, I can’t help but grin, knowing I can have that much of an effect on him. I want to keep exploring and find every spot that makes him weak. Another time, maybe.

Besides, Caelan is picking up the knife again, and my stomach flips, butterflies of anticipation fluttering into a storm. *Yes. God, yes. I’m ready for it.*

Caelan smiles wickedly at me. “Stay still, doll.”

The cold metal of the blade presses against the side of my neck, not digging in yet. He’s letting me feel the sensation of it. The sharpness of the edge, how easily it could tear into me. He slowly trails the tip along the line of my collarbones, down my sternum. I bite back a quiet whimper as he teases my peaked nipples with it. Thankfully, the dull edge.

Teasing. Like he promised.

Caelan pulls away for a moment, leaning back to pull his shirt over his head, tossing it aside. Then he settles into place, between my legs now, and nudges me with the knife, encouraging me to spread my thighs wider for him.

I take a deep breath to steady myself. The cold metal is a delicious contrast to my already warm and overheated skin and makes me want to squirm. But I stay still for him.

My knees are bent and raised, framing Caelan on either side. He hooks his elbow beneath one and leans in to lick a trail along the inside of my thigh. Then he places the knife there instead. Blade digging into the skin, pressing deep enough to give it some bite.

“Color?”

“Green.” I breathe. “Go ahead.”

He drags the knife, and it catches this time, splitting the skin in its wake. My breath hisses out between my teeth.

I was expecting it to be painful, but it isn’t. Not badly, anyway. It stings.

He starts slow, shallow like I asked. The cut is visible, a tear in the skin, but is not even bleeding. No, that takes longer. Several seconds pass before the blood finally wells up. Even then, it's sluggish, no worse than a paper cut, beading along the length of the gash.

What he said before, he could murder me. He could so easily break me. But despite the fact he's cutting me with a goddamn knife, he's being so damn gentle about it, holding back.

Not being murdered is fantastic and all, but he doesn't need to treat me quite so delicately, either. That's no fun for either of us.

“Mmm... more.”

The next cut is deeper, and blood wells to the surface immediately this time. The sadistic delight in Caelan's eyes as he slices into me makes my stomach flip and need flood my core.

It still doesn't *hurt*, certainly not unbearably. It doesn't feel any worse than if I dug my fingernails hard into my palm, just with an extra sting. Caelan is incredibly tactile about it too—his possessive grip, the way he runs his fingers over the skin he intends to cut next, and when he leans in and runs his tongue over the fresh gashes he's carved.

That last action of his makes my breath catch, heat flooding my face. It's a heady mix of sensations—pain, pleasure, the biting sting of the blade, the heat of Caelan's mouth against me. And I'm so helpless to do anything, completely at his mercy.

It's the most incredible thrill, and it makes me *ache*.

There doesn't seem to be any pattern to the cuts. Caelan's just littering shallow, bloody lines across the top and inside of my thighs. I'm gasping, making choked-back little half-noises as his knife slices into me. Over and over, slow and drawn out, as Caelan enjoys every moment.

He trails the tip of the knife over my hip. Then the next line is carved above the lace of my panties. That's the first one to drag an outright moan from me, and Caelan seems delighted.

“That’s it, baby. I wanna hear you.” He purrs, digging the knife into me again and reveling in the way the skin splits apart so easily for him.

Now that I’ve started being loud, I can’t hold it back anymore. Maybe because Caelan has moved higher now, his attention is on my hips, sides, and stomach. It’s so much more sensitive there. Or maybe because it keeps building and *building*. The cuts aren’t any deeper, and the sting isn’t any worse, but it’s like the dull ache left over from every previous cut keep adding together until it leaves me dizzy.

It makes me want to squirm so badly, but I don’t dare. Not with Caelan’s knife pressed into me. I tighten my hands into fists, my head tossed back, and my eyes clenched helplessly shut.

“C-Caelan, ahh...”

“You have no idea how fuckin’ good you look like this.”

His voice is so rough with want. His touch too, the clawed nails of his free hand grazing down my side and making me whimper.

It’s a lot. I’m forgetting to breathe, I can tell, and it’s adding to my lightheadedness. My thighs and stomach are a mess of vivid red lines. Blood is smeared against the skin where Caelan’s fingers or lips have been.

He’s moving upward, knife cutting into my chest just above the soft tissue of my breasts now. Slowly still, savoring it, and the way he drags it out only makes the sensation more intense.

Maybe a little too intense. It hurts, but at the same time, it feels so good having Caelan all over me, making me ache with want, but my head is spinning, and I just—

“Ugh. Y-yellow, Caelan, I...”

The knife immediately lowers away, and Caelan’s expression shifts to one of concern. “You all right? Shannon?”

I take a moment to gulp in a few steadying breaths. “Mmm. I don’t want to stop. I just... need a breather.”

“Need me to back off?”

I shake my head with as much vehemence as I can muster. The contact is good. It's helping ground me and gives me something to focus on. "Stay. Just... hold me, talk to me for a moment?"

"All right. You sure you're doin' okay?" he asks, obliging me. He's put the knife aside for the moment, one hand cradling the back of my head, the other rubbing small circles against my hip.

"Yeah. Just felt kind of lightheaded for a second, is all." Honestly, a moment to breathe was all I needed. The dizziness is fading already, and all that's left is the sensation of feeling delightfully buzzing and floaty.

Caelan gives a soft snort. "I forget how fragile you humans can be. So easy to break, and yet you'd still give yourself to me like this."

All I can do is grin up at him because, yeah, I'd absolutely give myself to him like this, and I'm hardly about to deny it. He's not looking at me, though. He's looking at the cuts he's left with an expression of utmost appreciation.

"Fuck. You're so good. So gorgeous like this, all marked up. All *mine*."

The way he says it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. "All yours," I agree, my voice cracking with a moan.

Caelan's eyes snap back up to meet mine, and he cups my face between his hands and kisses me until I'm breathless. The length of his body presses up against mine, his weight bearing down and pinning me to the bed. I can't resist arching up into the contact. He's so warm, and the connection of so much skin against skin is delicious. I wish his jeans weren't in the way, either.

Even with them, I can feel how hard Caelan is through the fabric. *God, he really is so damn into this knife-play thing, isn't he?* Though it's not like I can judge him for that, not with how wet, needy, and aching I am.

The way he presses against me and growls my name is *not* helping. "You have no idea how much I want to carve my name into you and just *claim* you."

He grinds against me, and I can't help the needy whimper that bursts

from my lips. When he says ‘claim,’ it’s clear he means it in a thoroughly physical sense. And I want that, *need* it too. The ache between my legs is driving me mad. I’ve been teased all evening. I have to get something inside me. And soon.

“Do it,” I beg him. “Please.”

“Which part? The carving or the claiming?”

“Both!” I blurt out the answer without thinking, but I realize it’s exactly what I want. The knife is fun and all, *very fun*, but the thought of him carving his name? Like a brand, a mark of ownership? It thrilled me when they left marks on me last time, but *that...*

My voice is shaky and desperate. “Make it deeper. Enough to scar for a few weeks at least. Months. Permanently, I don’t care, just... Caelan, please, I’ll be yours. Carve your name into me. I want it.”

Caelan’s eyes darken, and he leans in. When he kisses me again, it’s pure heat.

He reaches up, and it takes me a moment to realize what he’s doing, still utterly distracted by his lips against mine. But he’s undoing the ropes.

“No!” I protest. “I didn’t want to stop!”

Caelan chuckles. “Demanding little minx, ain’t ya? We’re not stopping. I’m gonna flip you over and carve into your back instead. It’ll be less sensitive for going deeper, yeah?”

“Oh. Okay.” I’ll miss being tied up, but it makes sense.

“Cute how much you want it, though,” he says, kissing the tip of my nose.

He unravels the last of the rope, rubbing my wrists to make sure the circulation is still flowing fine, before sliding his hands back down my sides. Then he takes my hips and flips me over, just as promised.

The cuts and slices on my front press against the covers, and I whine at the discomfort. Even though they have dried now, the contact still irritates them. At least they won’t bleed on the nice sheets, though.

I can feel them each time I squirm, which only worsens the stinging.

Caelan presses me down and holds me still with a hand around the back of my neck, just as a brief reminder. Then he lets go and trails his clawed nails down my spine to the small of my back.

My breath is catching again, anticipation heightening my senses and making me moan even at the slightest touch. The knife is back, and the tip of it grazes along the soft flesh of my waist, then lower.

“Ready?”

I nod helplessly, and Caelan doesn't keep me waiting. He braces one hand on my hip to hold me steady while the other presses the knife into me, and I gasp.

It's deeper now.

I can feel the difference, less surface-level sting, more bite.

It doesn't hurt too much more, though. In fact, it's almost easier this way. Caelan is eager and impatient. Each cut is quicker, not as drawn out as the one before. The pain of the knife slicing through my skin is more intense, but it's over sooner and oddly, I can handle it a lot better than the lingering ache. That, and the knowledge of what he's doing.

I can *feel* the shape of the lines he's carving, not in single straight lines, but in shorter, jagged strokes going over each mark several times until it spells out his name, and I'm clutching at the sheets choking on sobbing breaths because of how damn badly I need him. Want him. I'm his, all his. I have *his name carved into me*, and it's such a fucking turn on.

“Caelan!” I moan brokenly.

He only growls my name in response. The moment he's done, the knife is cast aside, somewhere amongst the covers, to the ground, maybe, I don't know. I hardly have the mental capacity left to care.

Caelan bites into my side hard enough to make me whimper and arch beneath him. Then his mouth trails hotly over the cuts he's carved into me. These ones are bleeding more significantly than any of the previous gashes,

and Caelan curls his tongue against the wounds to lap up the blood and *fuck*. Pure arousal rushes through me, heat pulsing in my core.

“Please! Oh, God, Caelan. I need you.”

He squeezes my hip in a reassuring agreement. “Get on your hand and knees,” he commands roughly. I immediately—desperately—scramble to obey, ending up braced on my forearms rather than on my hands, but it’s good enough.

Caelan’s presence vanishes momentarily, and the bed shifts as he removes his jeans. His hiss of relief as his erection is finally freed is clearly audible. There’s the sound of a condom wrapper tearing open. Then after a few moments, his hands are back on me again.

He hooks his fingers beneath my soaked panties. His knuckles graze against my hot, aching entrance, and I moan helplessly. God, I *need* it.

Caelan is every bit as impatient, worked up and turned on. He pulls the lacy fabric down my thighs, and then the head of his cock immediately presses against me. My breath catches on a moan. *Yes, fuck yes. Please.*

I’m only half aware of my own noises, a sound of pure, blissful relief falling from my lips as he slowly sinks into me. It feels so fucking amazing to be filled up. And *God*, he fills me so good.

“A-ahh, Caelan...”

“Fuck. You’re so goddamn tight for me,” he growls out. His breath is hot against the back of my neck, and it makes my hair stand on end.

I clench around him, so desperate and needy for it, and the way he rocks into me sends heady waves of pleasure searing through my veins. He pins my wrists to the bed while he fucks me from behind, the blood smearing on my back and my own slick trickling down my thighs.

Rough, messy, filthy. Exactly what I needed.

One hand migrates from my wrist to my neck, wrapping around my throat and applying enough pressure to make me gasp. Not choking me, but the thrill of the threat makes me tremble beneath him.

All I can do is groan his name over and over in a breathless litany, rolling my hips back to meet each thrust.

Caelan tightens his grip briefly in warning, then pulls me upright. He switches our positions around so he's the one at the head of the bed, leaning back against the headboard, and I'm in his lap with my back to his chest, his cock buried even deeper inside me.

I kick my panties off the rest of the way to spread my legs wider for him, leaning back and letting my head fall against his shoulder. The new position gives him access to the front of my body, and Caelan purrs as he trails his fingers over all the cuts and gashes he's left littered across me.

"So gorgeous. Such a good girl for me."

I don't have the coherence to respond with words, but I moan in agreement. Turning my head to nuzzle against his neck, I move my hand to cover his where it's settled on my hip and tangle our fingers together. Casual gestures of affection as he's thrusting roughly up into me, his other hand still squeezing around my throat, feels so deliciously, blissfully sinful.

I litter soft kisses against his neck while grinding my hips down to take in as much of him as possible. Distantly, eyes blank and glazed over with pleasure, I grin. There's no conscious thought behind the action. I'm barely capable of thinking anything right now other than *yes* and *more* and *please*, but I raise myself on my knees and turn, straddling Caelan so we're face to face.

Both of us groan as I sink back down onto his cock.

Caelan grips my hair and pulls me in for another kiss. It's every bit as rough, passionate, and deep as the way he's fucking me, and the way his tongue ravages my mouth is—damn.

"Caelan," I beg helplessly. I'm trembling against him, the way his cock pounds into me, making my eyes roll back, and the heat and pleasure are almost too much to bear. The intensity of it leaves me utterly breathless, and all I can do is cling to him while he grips my hips and slams into me. I'm

probably leaving scratches by clawing at his back, but from his enthusiasm, it only spurs him on.

I'm going to come and soon. Caelan is so unrelenting. Every touch, every thrust, is driving me rapidly toward my peak. I want him to come too. So, I lower my head, mouth trailing hotly along the stubble of his facial hair, then down to his throat. I find that sensitive spot behind his jaw and bite down. Caelan swears, tightening his grip on me enough to hurt, but I'm so caught up in the moment that the pain is only another sensation to add to the already heady mix of pleasure and lust. I'm going to have claw marks torn into my hips before the end of this. Worth it, though. So worth it.

I don't stop, bruising a hickey against Caelan's throat.

"Shannon—" he chokes out, half in pleasure, half in warning. All his noises grow louder—the groans as he fucks me, the guttural gasps.

I can't form words at all. Even if my mouth wasn't preoccupied, I couldn't think through the heat and need and *Caelan*. All I can do is moan, clinging to him even tighter. I tense in his grip, clenching down around his cock as my orgasm tears through me.

I'm being too loud, crying out with pleasure, but *goddamn*. It's good, so good, but intense enough to be almost overwhelming.

Caelan's not far behind, only needing a few more rough, erratic thrusts into my trembling cunt before he's coming. He pulls me away from his neck so he can kiss me instead, tasting my lips as we ride out our orgasms together.

I'm still shaking even once it's over, slumping limply against Caelan's chest, eyes glazed, heart racing, and panting to catch my breath. *Damn. That was—damn.*

Neither of us move. I don't even think I can.

Caelan slowly runs his fingers down my spine. "You okay?" I moan in reply. That gets a quiet laugh out of him. "That good, huh?"

I smile a stupid all-fucked-out grin and kiss him again. I still can't quite

speak, but *yeah*, I'm so okay.

He lets me stay like that a while longer, laying against him with his cock softening inside me. His attention turns to the small of my back, just above my hip, where the flesh is sliced and bloody. Lightly tracing the letters he's left carved into me. The contact makes me shiver and sigh.

"All right," he prompts. "We oughta get you cleaned up."

"Mmm..." I agree, if somewhat reluctantly. I'm a mess. Sticky with blood, sweat, and my own slick. A shower is definitely needed, but all I want to do is stay tangled up with Caelan and pass out in his arms.

Caelan lifts me off him, and I moan softly as his cock slides free. He leaves me only long enough to get rid of the condom, then returns and kisses me again. He grins, amused. "You gonna be able to walk, or should I carry you?"

Honestly, I probably could walk. *Maybe*. I still feel boneless and limp in the aftermath of the pleasure, but I've had enough time to recover that, hopefully, my knees won't completely give out on me. But the physical contact of being held against Caelan is too tempting to pass up.

I reach out for him, and he snorts. He knows exactly what I'm doing, but he indulges me anyway and scoops me up.

Despite the time I've had to gather myself, I'm still shaky, and Caelan can tell. He sets me on my feet in the bathtub but keeps an arm wrapped around my waist, letting me stay leaning against him.

We could have taken a bath together like last time, but I'm glad Caelan's settled for a quick shower this evening. As enjoyable as a bath would have been, I'd rather clean up quickly and return to curling up in bed.

Well, maybe not too quickly. Caelan takes his time, grinning wickedly as he helps me wash, his hands all over me. I'm not sure how much is meant to help and how much is just feeling me up, but I'm hardly complaining. His eyes linger on all the marks he's left, which are now nothing more than vivid red lines, looking no worse than scratches now the blood's been washed

away, and the intensity of his gaze makes me shiver despite the warmth of the water.

“Feel better?” He grins, and I nod.

“Mm-hmm,” I finally manage. “Amazing.” My voice is still strained and breathless but not lacking in any sincerity.

“So. Think you’re into knife play after trying it?”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re good,” I say with a laugh, as if that wasn’t damn obvious.

“With a knife or my dick?”

I snort. “Both.” Like he doesn’t already know it. But his smug grin says he likes to hear it anyway. “But... maybe not all the time, with the knife. That was incredible but kind of intense. I don’t think I could handle it as a regular thing, y’know?”

“ ’Course.”

“Every so often, though, that would be nice.”

I say that as if ‘often’ is a relevant measure of time when it comes to Elias and Caelan. I don’t see them often enough to begin with. And I’m working under the assumption that this agreement, relationship, whatever it even is between us at this point, is going to continue long term. The implication it will has been there since the first night, and I suppose there’s no reason to think it wouldn’t. Just as long as they don’t get bored of me, or I manage to mess it up with any feelings or bullshit like that.

Because being with Caelan like this, held in a loose embrace against him after being so thoroughly fucked, I really feel like I like him so much more than I should. I’m getting carried away. An infatuated idiot. But some foolish, overly romantic part of me almost wants to say that I kind of love him a little already.

I don’t want to risk speaking and letting anything as stupid as that slip out, so I kiss him instead.

He’s grinning when I pull away. “You’re so precious.” He purrs. His

hand wraps around me, ghosting over the deeper mark on my back. “And now you’re mine for good. Pretty sure this one is gonna scar.”

“Good.”

“You okay with that? You said earlier you didn’t really want any permanent marks.”

I shrug, pushing aside the way my stomach flips at how casually he says I’m his, for good. “I don’t want to be covered in scars. Like, all the little lines wouldn’t really mean anything. It’d be messy. But if it’s your name... that’s different, that means something.” It means so much. “It was kind of a heat-of-the-moment thing, but I definitely don’t regret it.”

“Heh. Good. Elias would have my hide if I’d already pushed your limits too much.”

I raise my eyebrows, grinning suggestively. “Oh, really? Would he punish you for it?”

Caelan pinches my side, and I make a noise somewhere between a shriek and a laugh. “You’d like to see that, wouldn’t you?”

“Maybe.” I gasp, trying to wriggle away.

“Maybe I should punish *you*,” he growls out.

When he doesn’t let me go, I wrap my arms around him instead, still laughing lightly. “Some other time, maybe. You’ve already worn me out tonight.”

Thoroughly worn me out. I’ve perked up a lot more with the shower and teasing, but I’m still nowhere near recovered enough for any more of *that*. Caelan must notice and doesn’t push the matter. He turns off the water and helps me out, wrapping a towel around his waist and then another around me.

“You bring pajamas?” Caelan asks.

I nod, thankful for having the forethought to bring a pair of shorts and a cozy T-shirt. I figured it might come in handy after being thoroughly fucked and wanting to be comfortable.

Grabbing the pajamas out of my bag, I place them on the bed. Caelan

quickly dries himself off and changes into a pair of boxers, then returns to my side with a brown glass bottle in his hand, shooting me a wry grin.

“Elias would also be pissed if I didn’t take care of you like I promised.” He shakes the bottle by way of explanation. “Disinfectant.”

“Is that the horrible stingy sort?” I ask, wrinkling my nose in distaste.

“Probably, I dunno. Not like I’ve tried it.” Caelan shrugs. “But better than you getting an infection. ‘Specially on that deep one.”

I guess he has a point. He probably doesn’t need to worry about things like that, but I am only human. I don’t think the scratches are an issue, as shallow as they are, but it’s kind of sweet that they’d think of trying to look after me like that.

After I finish wiping myself dry as best I can, I let my towel fall, settling back on the edge of the bed. It *is* the stingy sort of disinfectant, it turns out, and I hiss as Caelan dabs it over each of my cuts. But it’s no worse than when he was cutting me in the first place.

There’s no point trying to cover them. The slices are too long for Band-Aids, and bandages would be severe overkill. Not to mention I’d end up wrapped tighter than a mummy if we were to cover every single mark he’s left on me. The thought makes me giggle.

Caelan turns me around so he can get to my back, paying more attention to the wound there. His mouth grazes over it, briefly but hotly, making my breath catch in my throat. Then he carefully wipes it down with the disinfectant.

He’s unusually gentle about it, treating me carefully, making my heart ache.

“There. That should do you.”

“Thank you.” It hardly seems enough to convey my gratitude for him caring enough to look after me, for everything, but I’m too tired to worry about it. I wriggle into my pajamas, then crawl up the bed, burrowing into the covers. Pulling them aside, I hold them open in a hopeful gesture.

Caelan turns off the lights, bar one lamp turned down low in the corner for when Elias returns, I presume, and obligingly joins me with a fond, amused grin.

There's no way I'm staying up waiting for Elias this time. I have no idea when he will be finished with his meeting, and my body is aching and exhausted. There'll be time tomorrow for me to spend with him.

Caelan is warm and inviting, and I curl up against him with my head resting against his shoulder. I lean enough to lightly kiss the bruise I left on his neck, which earns me a small hiss.

“Don't start that again, you little vampire.”

The name makes me laugh. “I wasn't starting anything,” I promise.

And I wasn't. I'm warm, comfortable, and worn out. It was only a goodnight kiss, but I couldn't resist being a bit of a tease about it.

I kiss him again softly on the lips, and he wraps his arm around my waist. He's not quite touching where his name is carved into me, not now he's just cleaned the cuts up, but his fingers hover at the edges, and it's clear where his attention is.

It still stings, the smaller cuts are more annoying for that, all over me, and no matter where I lie, I'm putting pressure on some of them. But I'm so exhausted that even the discomfort can't keep me awake, and I soon fall asleep curled against Caelan's side.

Chapter Ten

My rest is fitful, and I toss and turn constantly, instinctively trying to get more comfortable but too tired to wake up properly. I'm not sure what makes me open my eyes, but I find myself alone in bed. It's still dark, just one lamp dimly lighting the other side of the room, and I can hear voices. *Elias must be back.*

They're too quiet for me to make out what they're saying, but it doesn't sound particularly antagonistic. In fact, if I had to hazard a guess, the low rumble of Elias' tone sounds rather suggestive, and Caelan's being his usual flirty, teasing little shit self in return.

If I was more awake, I would've been very interested in seeing what they were up to because there are a few noises, choked-back gasps, and quiet groans that make it sound like they're doing a bit more than just talking. Unfortunately, sleep drags me back under before I can give it any further thought.

When I finally wake properly, the room is lit with the pale light of early morning. Both Elias and Caelan are in bed with me. Even with the generous king-size bed, it's a bit of a squash, as Caelan sprawls out.

Elias is sitting up, reclined on a pillow propped against the headboard, casually reading through a file in one hand. Shirtless and wearing only a pair of sleep pants that sit rather low on his hips, he is a lovely sight to wake up

to.

Elias notices me stirring and runs a hand through my hair. “Good morning.”

I curl up tighter at his side, my head resting against his thigh. “Do you even sleep?” I mutter.

Elias chuckles. “We don’t have the same need for sleep as you. We can, and it is pleasant enough, just not necessary. But yes, I did.”

I glance over at Caelan, who seems dead to the world on my other side.

“Caelan enjoys being lazy,” Elias says in response to my unasked question, his lips quirking into a smile somewhere between amused and exasperated. Then his expression turns more serious. “How was he last night?”

I grin, knowing what Elias is asking. “*Very good,*” I reply in a suggestive purr, then giggle as Elias lightly swats my thigh in admonishment. I stretch out beneath the covers, reluctantly gearing myself up to move. “I’ll tell you about it in a sec, but I gotta go for a morning bathroom break first.”

“Of course.”

The only options for getting out are an undignified wriggle to the foot of the bed or clambering over either Elias or Caelan. I don’t want to wake Caelan, so I carefully throw my legs over Elias’ lap instead, straddling him for a moment before sliding off the other side. He raises an eyebrow over his files.

Despite the small moment of teasing Elias, I am not awake just yet. Being out of bed at all feels like a chore. I finish in the bathroom quickly, wanting nothing more than to crawl beneath the covers and curl up with them both.

After splashing water on my face, I rinse my mouth out. After all, Elias is right there, awake and in the same bed. It would be a shame not to sneak in a few kisses, and I don’t want morning breath.

When I get back, I find Elias has put his paperwork aside, waiting for me. He gestures me over with one finger, and I bite my lip, obediently climbing

back into his lap.

I lay against his chest, and he slides his hands down my thighs. “Let me see,” Elias says, and I realize he’s inspecting the cuts Caelan left on me.

“Caelan was sweet,” I say, seriously now, in answer to the question Elias had intended before I left. I decide not to mention the brief murder threats. “He took good care of me, I promise.”

My pajama shorts ride high enough that almost all the marks on my thighs are visible, but Elias pushes my top up to see the rest. The contact of his cool fingers running up my sides makes me shiver.

He pauses over the larger wound on my back, lightly brushing against the raw edges of it. “Ah, yes. Caelan mentioned this.”

I duck my head, feeling the heat rise to my face. It’s embarrassing to be called out on what we did, but I am so not over the delight of being marked with Caelan’s name like that.

“We may have got, um, a little bit carried away. But it was very much mutual.” I can’t help but notice the way Elias is frowning, though. “Are you upset?”

He closes his eyes for a moment, taking a breath and visibly forcing himself to let go of his tension. “I apologize, dear. It makes me feel somewhat possessive to see another man’s claim on you like that. Even if it is only Caelan, and we did agree to share.”

“Should I get him to carve your name into me as well next time?” I suggest. Only partially joking.

Elias’ lips twitch up into a small half-smile. “I wouldn’t be *entirely* opposed to that. However, I think you’ve been cut up enough for the time being.”

Seemingly satisfied with his inspection, Elias lifts me and lays me back on the bed next to him. He then lies down, face to face with me, and drapes his arm over my waist in a loose embrace.

I curl closer, legs tangling with his and my head resting against his chest.

I can tell I'm wearing a sleepy, content smile. The casual affection feels so easy and comfortable.

They shouldn't make me this stupidly, unthinkingly happy. They really shouldn't. If I had any sense at all, I'd at least try to keep my guard up. But all it takes is Elias kissing my forehead to make me melt all over again, and I tilt my head up, kissing him on the lips in return.

Elias quickly takes over the kiss, but there's nothing demanding about it. It's soft, sleepy. His hands are the same, caressing my back for the enjoyment of the contact.

I adore both of them, and as much as I very much enjoyed my time with Caelan, it's never quite the same as when they're both there.

I express this sentiment to Elias between kisses, and Elias smirks. "You prefer having both of us... how greedy."

"I didn't mean like *that*." I laugh. Although, what Elias is implying is good too. The idea of having both of them in bed at the same time makes me squirm.

Elias seems to agree. When he kisses me again, there's more heat behind it than before. I moan softly and yield beneath his touch. It's still not demanding, with no pressure behind it, but it's suggestive enough to have my face flushing.

God, it's good. Just sleepily making out with him, slower than usual, more sensual than outright sexual. His tongue is stroking inside my mouth with a languid thoroughness that makes me feel weak. His hands are all over me, still caressing, exploring my hips, waist, and sides. The process pushes my top up until I find my bare breasts pressed against his chest.

He has me feeling so warm already. "Elias," I murmur against his lips. We could keep making out like this. There's no rush, but at the same time, I love the idea of sleepy, sensual morning-after sex.

He rolls me over onto my back, hovering over me. I grin, and he leans down, kissing me again. He's not bearing his weight on me, not entirely, but

he's pressed closed enough that I can feel his growing hardness against my thigh.

Wrapping my arms around Elias' shoulders, I roll my hips against him with a quiet moan of pleasure. It feels so good. Not an aching, desperate need—not yet—but I can't deny the desire seeping through me. I want him.

Elias kisses me a few more times, less tender and moving toward passionate. Then he pulls away and reaches for the bedside table. They've had the forethought to stock the top drawer with condoms, figuring we'd need them.

It kind of makes me laugh, wondering how many we will end up going through. It's not like I normally have a very active sex life. I've not seen anyone since being with them last, and even before that, it has been a long time since my last relationship. So maybe I'm making up for lost time.

Elias pauses before opening the wrapper. "Do you want to—"

I interrupt with a laugh. "Um... yes," I say. He's not reading the signals wrong.

Elias kisses me, tugging on my bottom lip with his teeth. "No need to be cheeky about it," he admonishes lightly.

"You love a bit of sass. Why else would you have stuck with Caelan so long?"

Elias only taps the side of my thigh again. There's not enough strength behind it to call it a spank, but it still stings because of the cuts and makes me squirm all the same.

"I'm kidding. It's sweet you want to check, but just do me already."

"Greedy *and* demanding," Elias murmurs, but there's an amused light in his eyes.

He pushes his sleep pants down over his hips, and my eyes are drawn hungrily to what lies beneath. I kick my own pajama shorts off while Elias rolls the condom on, then he settles between my legs. My knees naturally fall into place, framing his hips on either side, and I reach up to wrap my arms

around his shoulders again. The anticipation makes my heart flutter.

Elias slowly sinks into me, and my breath rushes out in a heady gasp. *Fuck*. Even after seeing him, I kind of forgot how damn big he is. The way he stretches me open, inch by blissful inch, feels absolutely delicious.

“Mmm... Elias...” I sigh. I lock my ankles behind the small of Elias’ back as he slowly buries himself all the way into me, as deep as he can get. He stays there a moment, allowing me to breathe and adjust. *Damn*. He’s so thick, hot, and hard.

God, it feels so full.

Then he starts to move, and I moan. Slow, unhurried. Just rocking into me, his cock stroking inside me rather than thrusting hard, but I’m perfectly happy with the pace.

I lazily roll my hips up to meet him. It might not be as rough as usual, but all it takes is a shift of his angle, and suddenly his cock is grinding right up against my sweet spot. I can’t help the whimper that bursts from my lips.

“Ohh, *fuck*. There, just like that, Elias, *please*.” I gasp.

Elias smirks, so damn smug at being able to get that much reaction from me even when he’s barely doing anything. “Good?” he asks. As if it’s not already obvious.

“So good.”

He picks up the pace a bit, the intensity rising. Not too much more, just a little faster, harder. I want to moan, but dammit, Caelan is right there sleeping beside us, I can’t make too much noise.

Of course, Elias takes that as a challenge, and now that he knows where I’m most sensitive, he grinds his cock against my sweet spot mercilessly. Every shallow thrust sends heated waves of pleasure through me, building until I’m flushed and panting. And all I can do, all I want to do because I wouldn’t change a damn thing right now, is lie here and roll my hips into every thrust, taking Elias as deep as I can. Sleepy, malleable, and so receptive for him.

His lips are against mine, tongue in my mouth, gently devouring me. He has one hand gripping my waist and the other tangled into my hair. My arms wrap around him, holding him close, clinging to him as he works me steadily toward my orgasm.

I murmur his name senselessly, over and over in breathless adoration, until his mouth claims mine again, and he swallows my moans as I come. Elias stays buried deep inside, rolling his hips against me, drawing the pleasure out, leaving me trembling with desire and my fingers twitching and clawing at his back. He keeps thrusting, shallowly but quicker now, until his cock twitches and bucks inside me. I purposely clench down around him, and his low, emphatic groan of pleasure makes me shiver in delight.

We stay like that, locked together, and Elias' lips languidly brush against mine, against my jawline, my cheekbones. We are slowly coming down from our respective highs until Caelan interrupts.

“Well, shit,” he drawls. “If I didn't already have morning wood, I sure would now.”

I start, head jerking back in surprise. I hadn't noticed him waking at all. In my defense, I'd been a little preoccupied.

“Caelan!” I protest mildly.

“So, you gonna help a guy out, or...”

Okay. I giggle at that.

“Really, Caelan?” Elias sighs with exasperated fondness, but his expression is entirely wicked.

Elias slides his softened cock out of me, and I can't help but groan quietly at the loss. He gets out of bed long enough to dispose of the condom, then goes around to Caelan's side, pulling the covers back.

“Hey!” Caelan gripes in the sudden cold. His protests are cut short as Elias hooks his fingers into the waistband of Caelan's boxers and pulls them down, then Elias' mouth is on Caelan's firm arousal.

My eyes widen, surprised yet delighted by this abrupt turn of events.

“Damn...”

“*Shit,*” Caelan agrees, hips bucking into Elias’ mouth. Apparently, he hadn’t expected Elias to be so immediately indulgent, either.

Damn, is still all I can think, honestly. Elias looks good with Caelan’s dick in his mouth. Looks like he knows exactly what he’s doing, familiar with how to make Caelan writhe beneath him.

Caelan tosses his head back, eyes clenched shut and lips parted. The flush rising to his face is clearly visible, chest heaving as he struggles to remember how to breathe when his cock is balls-deep in Elias’ throat. His clawed fingers tangle in Elias’ hair and mindlessly shove him down until Elias grunts, but Elias doesn’t seem to mind all that much.

I can’t stop staring. The arch of Caelan’s back, the helpless pleasure written all over his face. The way Elias’ fingers clutch at Caelan’s thighs, the slick stretch of his lips wide around Caelan’s cock.

God, they look incredible together.

Caelan wasn’t kidding about the morning wood. He must have already been pretty turned on because it’s not long until he’s gasping out a warning to Elias. Elias snorts a muffled laugh, not intending to let Caelan go until he’s sucked him dry.

“Fuck, *Elias,*” Caelan groans, his voice cracking as his control slips.

The sight of Caelan’s orgasm face is a very nice one to be greeted with early in the morning.

Elias keeps licking and swallowing around Caelan’s spent, over-sensitive dick until Caelan growls and shoves him off. He moans as Elias lets his cock finally slide free, with a few last licks and kisses for good measure. Elias runs his tongue over his lips to catch the last few drops of Caelan’s seed, looking as smugly arrogant as anything, and it makes my stomach flip to watch.

Damn.

Caelan covers his face with his arm, out of breath and speechless for once.

I laugh and shift closer, curling against him and pressing a kiss to the corner of his lips. “Good morning,” I say.

“Heck yeah, it is,” Caelan eventually agrees, still panting.

It’s still early enough that there’s no need to get out of bed or go anywhere just yet. And, warm, sleepy and satisfied, I’m perfectly happy to stay lazing around for a while longer.

Elias returns to his original position, settled at my other side, and brushes his lips against the back of my neck. “So, dear. What would you like to do today?” he asks, licking his lips with a smirk.

Dammit. Watching what he did is enough to get me flustered. My brain is still too overheated from being fucked and from seeing Elias suck Caelan off, I can’t focus on the question.

I hum something vague and non-committal. Honestly, I hadn’t thought far ahead enough to consider what we would do today.

“We could stay like this,” Caelan suggests. “In bed. Having some fun.” He grins suggestively, and I can’t help but snicker.

We could. That’s an option. And a very appealing one. Yet, at the same time, I don’t want them just for sex. We only have a limited amount of time together, and while we *could* certainly spend it fucking, I also want to spend time with them. Like the dates, the dancing, hanging out, teasing each other. Getting to know them as much as they’ll let me.

“Mmm... later, for sure. But... maybe we could go out somewhere first?”

“Anywhere you like,” Elias offers.

I wasn’t expecting it to be my choice. So far, Elias has always been the one calling the shots, and it leaves me floundering, trying to think of something to do. Honestly, what we do doesn’t matter. I only want to be with them.

I don’t know LA well, and I’ve never been a fan of the city itself. I’d rather go somewhere nicer, somewhere chill. “I don’t mind that much. Maybe just... the beach or something, Santa Monica pier?” It’s a cliché sort of date

idea, but I can't think of anything better on such short notice. "Only as long as you really have nothing better to do, though."

"Mmm... beach," Caelan says. Just from the tone of his voice, I can tell he's going to get up to mischief.

"That sounds pleasant enough," Elias agrees.

"Later, though," I murmur, yawning. I'm entirely content staying in bed and dozing some more, tangled together with them beneath the covers. And I really need another shower before going anywhere, plus getting dressed. That all still sounds like far too much effort.

Caelan's fingers lightly massage against my scalp, my head resting against his shoulder. And Elias presses against me from behind, his arm draping over me with his hand covering mine. Yeah, I'm good staying like this for a while longer.

We've still got the whole day ahead of us. I can spare the time for simple affection.

Although perhaps I end up staying in bed a *little* longer than I meant to. It's so hard to get up when I'm the warmest, most satisfied, and most comfortable I've ever been.

When I stir again, I'm still lying beside Caelan, our legs tangled together and my head resting against his shoulder. I'm drifting in and out of sleep. His fingers graze over me, mainly my thighs and sides, where all his cuts are littered. There's a smug amusement as his nails catch against them, and I mutter something annoyed in my half-awake daze.

He's so damn pleased with having marked me up, and honestly? I love it too.

His.

Theirs.

Elias isn't one for wasting so much time doing nothing. He moved while I was dozing, only to bring his paperwork and laptop back to the bed. His comforting presence is still on my other side, sitting upright against the

pillows while he works.

I stretch out and roll over, nuzzling my head against his hip. “Morning, Elias.”

“Good morning. For the second time.”

“Hush. I need sleep time to recover after getting fucked by both of you.”

“Oh, you loved it,” Caelan claims, and I grin. He’s not wrong.

Elias doesn’t try overly hard to keep a straight face, allowing his amusement to show in the slight raise of his eyebrow.

“What are you working on?” I ask him, tilting my head toward the laptop screen. Just gently, not really expecting an answer. They’re not overly forthcoming about what they do outside of the standard band work that any fan has access to.

I’m curious if there’s anything else to it. Do they still do demon things? They said they were trapped here, isolated. They haven’t given any indication they’re still in contact with any other demons. Maybe Goëtica really is all they have now. Or maybe they have other, more unsavory dealings. I wouldn’t know.

I get it. I understand why they wouldn’t go too much into unpleasantries. But at the same time, I wish they would open up more.

Whatever Elias is doing here and now, with paperwork full of numbers and accounts and a lot of sending emails, doesn’t seem like it could be too terrible.

“Tour management, venue bookings, discussing revenue. Nothing exciting, I can assure you.”

I raise my head higher, resting it on Elias’ lap so I can see the screen. “You don’t have a company that does all of that for you?”

He pauses. “No. Again, it’s best that our close interactions with humans be kept to a minimum. I would rather have full control of the situation. We have contracted teams to handle the basic equipment and sound checks on tour. That is a necessity that can’t be escaped, but it is easier to wave away

the lack of special effects crew by pulling the strings myself.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

Caelan snorts. “It is, but Elias is a damn workaholic or something. He gets all shifty if I ever try to get him to take a break for once.”

Elias waves a dismissive hand at this statement, but there’s a wry smile on his face. “Caelan helps when it is truly necessary. Under duress.”

I glance at Caelan, raising an eyebrow teasingly. “Duress? What? Does he have to threaten you?”

Caelan’s face splits into a shit-eating grin. “More like bribe. He lets me top the ever-loving shit out of him without complaining like a goddamn control-freak dick lord the entire time.”

I attempt to choke back my laugh but end up snorting and coughing inelegantly.

“Thank you for that input, Caelan,” Elias says. His tone is so deadpan it only makes me laugh harder.

I kiss Elias firmly on the mouth. “I laugh because I love you.”

Caelan smirks, thoroughly entertained by the whole exchange and my reaction.

“All right,” Elias interrupts, halfway between exasperated and amused himself. “We ought to get up if you actually wanted to go anywhere today.”

Ah. Right. It’s already creeping toward the afternoon, and we need to be back early in the evening to get ready for the gala. We’re only going to have an hour or two out in Santa Monica at this rate.

“Yes, Sir,” I reply, still giggling. I kiss Elias briefly again, then worm my way out of bed. Needing to shower and get dressed, I pick out my clothes from my bag and head into the bathroom. And since it’s already late as it is, I don’t want to take too long.

It’s only once I’ve stepped beneath the spray of warm water and processed the conversation that I realize I told Elias I loved him.

My blood runs cold.

Shit.

It had just slipped out. I hadn't thought about what I was saying, and I hadn't meant it *that* way, except maybe I low-key did. It had felt like the most natural turn of phrase to use.

Neither Elias nor Caelan had commented or indicated they'd noticed it.

I slowly allow the tension to bleed out of me again, letting the water wash it away.

It's okay. Right? No harm done.

I need to be more goddamn careful about my choice of words.

I have feelings for them.

I can't deny that.

But I can't be in love with them. I've only seen them twice, for Christ's sake. And had a three-month long-distance relationship in between, so maybe it's not quite unreasonable, but that's not particularly helpful to think about right now.

At the end of the day, they're demons. They've been nice, and I don't doubt they're fond of me on some level, but love is a bit much. I don't want to ruin what I already have by making them uncomfortable or making them think I have any expectations for them to return my feelings.

Because I *don't*.

All I need is to be better at managing my own.

And keeping my goddamn mouth shut.

I don't want to spoil a gorgeous morning by getting too caught up in my own thoughts. So I shove the whole issue aside and focus on washing.

I dry off quickly when I'm done, mindful of the shallow cuts littered all over me, and that's something much more pleasant to think about. Proof that last night happened. Proof of how Caelan had driven me out of my mind, delicately carving me apart with his knife until he had me begging for him.

A shiver of lust runs through me. Damn, that was hot. And then Elias this morning as well.

They're spoiling me. They really are.

Fortunately, the cuts are easy to cover. Caelan was good about that, keeping them out of sight. It's only a few lower down on my thighs, almost at my knees, that might have been visible beneath the high-waisted skirt I've got picked out. So, I pair it with some patterned leggings and a soft T-shirt and decide that'll do. My hoodie is still out in the main bedroom. I place my hand on the door to head out and retrieve it, but something makes me pause.

Some of my brightness dims as I hear Elias and Caelan talking. It's hardly unexpected. Personalities like theirs are bound to clash sometimes, but the most I've ever really seen has been playful snarking. From what I can hear through the door, though, there's genuine contention in their voices. Not quite an outright argument, not yet, but I don't want them to argue for real, especially not if it's over something to do with me.

I tentatively slip out of the bathroom to join them, bare feet padding softly on the bedroom carpet.

"It's not a big deal," Caelan insists.

They've dressed as well. Again, ripped jeans and a slightly dressier, for him, at least, bottle-green button-up shirt for Caelan, and a suit for Elias, although he's forgone the tie and left the top buttons undone for a slightly more casual look today.

"It's not worth the risk over something so petty."

"What risk?" Caelan scoffs. "You realize you're being an overprotective ass?"

Elias' fingers twitch as he smooths down his already immaculate jacket. "It is *completely* unnecessary."

"Um," I interject. "What's this about?"

They both turn to look at me, then at each other, as if trying to decide who ought to explain the situation.

Elias apparently gets the honor. "There is some deliberation over our method of transport, that's all."

Caelan rolls his eyes. “It’s not even the method that’s the problem. It’s this *bullshit*.”

I must be missing something. Transport seems such a ridiculous thing for them to be getting so at each other’s throats over. “Meaning...”

“The journey to Santa Monica pier is under half an hour by car. Do you really lack the patience to manage even that much?” Elias snaps.

“It’s not about patience! It’s about you getting a goddamn stick up your ass because I even mentioned the possibility of showing her the abyss.”

“What now?” I ask blankly.

Elias hisses, teeth grit, but Caelan steps in front of him and addresses me first.

“We’re bound to this shithole now, but demons can cross multiple dimensions. You realize that, right?” Caelan prompts. “Well, there’s space between dimensions, and even though we’re stuck here, we can still access that much. Thank fuck. It’s like a liminal space that doesn’t follow your laws of physics. You can enter one place and exit somewhere entirely different. It’s cool.”

“It is not *cool*,” Elias says, quietly seething. “It is *dangerous* for a human.”

“It’s not like we’re shifting her to some other dimension! It’s a shortcut, that’s all.”

“*I don’t want her in the abyss*,” Elias snaps.

I shrink back. Even not directed at me, hearing his anger break loose like that is chilling, violent shards of shadow flare out and writhe around him. I swallow, suddenly afraid to speak up. “Elias? Please don’t be mad. I swear I’m not trying to undermine you or anything. I just don’t understand. You can access another realm?”

“A space between realms,” he replies shortly. “It is not a pleasant place for humans.”

“We could go through there and be at the beach in two fucking seconds,

and both of us would be right there with her,” Caelan says, frustrated. “Why is that such a problem to you?”

“I am *trying* to protect her!”

Caelan is unphased by Elias’ anger. He’s used to it, I suppose. He looks bemused. “Uh. From the abyss? Get real. It’s not that bad.”

“From *us*,” Elias clarifies.

A tense silence settles as I try to process what that even means. Slowly and with a definite level of caution, I stubbornly approach and touch Elias’ wrist. “Why would I need protection from you? You’ve been nothing but nice to me.”

“Too nice, evidently. You forget what we are,” he says coldly.

“No. I know you’re demons, and maybe I don’t know exactly what that means or what it entails, but only because you won’t *let* me know.”

Elias growls. “There’s good reason for that, dear.”

Frustration makes me scowl at him in return. “Look, I don’t care about *what* you are. I care about *you!*”

He turns to me, and his hand flies up before I even have time to process what’s happening. I gasp sharply as his fingers wrap around my throat, but it’s only from the shock of it. He catches himself almost immediately, his grip never tightening enough to choke me. He freezes and holds me like that, raging within himself.

“I have tried very hard to maintain a human façade for you,” he says slowly, voice rough. “Why do you insist on seeking out the parts of our existence that are less palatable to your kind?”

My heart is pounding, adrenaline pumping through my veins. *Oh God, he’s kind of terrifying.* But I refuse to back down so easily. “I literally just told you that. *Sir.* I want to know you, the real you, demon and all, not some mask you’re trying to keep up to protect me or whatever this is about.”

“You shouldn’t want that.”

“Well, I fucking do!” The silence stretches out again, neither of us willing

to give ground. Elias lets his hand fall from my throat, and I take in a deep, shaky breath. “Please. Is that what this is really about? You don’t trust me enough to be yourselves, or don’t want me to know what you’re capable of or something?”

Elias looks pained. “It is for your own good that you keep your distance.”

“It’s a little late for that, isn’t it?” I step in closer again, and when Elias doesn’t react, I reach up to touch his arm. “Please don’t shut me out now,” I murmur. “All I want is a chance.”

He sighs tensely, then breathes out. I squeak as he pulls me into an embrace. It takes a moment for the tension to bleed from my body, but I relax against him and let my head rest against his shoulder. The affection is nice now that the moment of confrontation is over, and I feel myself growing shaky. I never do well with arguments.

Elias must notice because the last of his stubborn anger fades out into concern. “I... apologize. I only want what is best for you.”

“It’s okay. I get it.” I *think* I should be flattered, probably, that he cares enough to try so hard to protect me. Even if he went about it in a kind of idiotic way, thinking he needed to be worried about letting me see too much evidence of their true nature. Or whatever he was so worried about.

“So, can we travel through the abyss and just go already, now?” Caelan asks.

I giggle, although a little strained still, then glance up at Elias. “I’d like to see this... abyss, if that’s okay?”

I’m ready to go. All I need to do is grab my hoodie and pull my boots on, which I leave Elias to hastily do.

Elias grunts. “There’s not much to see. It’s a space between realities. Nothing exists there.”

“I mean, it’s called the abyss. It’s pretty much what it says on the tin. And, honestly, as much of a dick as Elias was about it, he does kind of have a point. It’s trippy if you ain’t used to that shit,” Caelan adds with a shrug.

He scoops me up in a bridal carry the second I'm done tying my laces. I yelp, instinctively wrapping my arms around Caelan's neck.

"I'd recommend closing your eyes, doll," he says, grinning wickedly.

Now that even Caelan is describing it like that, I'm second-guessing this is a good idea. Not that I have time to think about backing out now because Caelan's already moving. I bury my head into the crook of his neck and close my eyes as directed. I'm glad I do because even without being able to see, it feels *wrong*. It makes my skin crawl, and my stomach drops with the same sickening lurch as when you miscount the stairs and place your foot through a step that doesn't exist. Only worse. It's the entire world vanishing out from under us for a split second.

A few seconds is all it is, thankfully. Then the warmth of sunlight against my skin, the taste of salt in the air, and enough ambient noise of people and the ocean indicate we are exactly where I'd asked them to take me.

I keep my eyes closed and stay clinging to Caelan a moment longer than strictly necessary.

"How was that?" Caelan asks, grinning as he lets me slide out of his grip and to my feet.

Honestly, I still feel off and shaky about the whole thing, though it's hard to tell if it's because of that place or the argument and Elias' anger.

My boots settle into the sand, and I blink in the sudden brightness as I open my eyes. We're next to the pier rather than on it. Too crowded up there to be appearing out of nowhere, I suppose. Here, the large sandbank mostly shelters us from view, and further behind that are steps leading up to the pier itself. Elias followed immediately after Caelan and me. Although he's not mad anymore, he is observing my reaction.

"It was weird," I admit. "I see your point. It's not *nice*. But it was over quickly, and it's not terrible when I've got you."

Elias takes my hand and gently squeezes my fingers. I'm not sure if it's reassurance, an apology, or some unspoken combination of both. "Shall we

go up to the pier, then?” he suggests.

I pause for a moment. “If it’s okay, I wanted to go for a walk first. Like, along the coast down to Venice Beach, then back up, and finish at the pier?” It’s not exactly a short walk, very far from it, but it gives me more time to spend with them.

Besides, I kind of want a chance to clear my head, get some fresh air, and move around a bit. I want to get rid of the lethargy from staying in so long, and take some time to process.

That moment Elias lashed out, he could have seriously hurt me, and it was the first time I’d been genuinely *afraid* of being with them. But I’ve always known that sort of thing was a very real risk. It would have been stupid to think otherwise, dealing with demons. Thankfully, he had stopped himself in the end, cared enough to snap out of it and pull back.

Still, for the moment, it has left me a little unsettled.

“Of course,” Elias says, not letting go of my hand, and I lean into him for a moment. Maybe some subconscious part of me seeks affection to soothe my frayed nerves.

He kisses the top of my head. The argument is over now. I squeeze my fingers against his in return, facing forward.

It’s time to make this a proper date.

Chapter Eleven

We walk along the beach to the wide concrete main path lined with tall palms. It's not overly busy since it's the low season for tourists and the weather is mediocre by LA standards. It's distinctly on the gray, hazy side and chilly enough that I'm glad to have my hoodie. But it's still a lot nicer than the heart of the city, with the expanse of golden sand stretching so far out to the side that I can barely see the ocean at all.

Elias and Caelan are in human glamour again. I barely even notice how they slip between their forms anymore. But I'm not going to lie, there is something particularly appealing when their inhumanity is visible. Of course, that's probably the opposite of what Elias wants me to think, given the way he was acting earlier, but there's no denying what my heart craves.

Elias is still holding my hand and Caelan walks on my other side, hands in his pockets but close enough that his shoulder brushes against mine every so often. He seems content to observe the surroundings and people walking by, though I feel he's nowhere near as unguarded as his casual posture suggests.

The path leads first past a training area, an outdoor gym with various pieces of metal equipment scattered across the beach and then winds around grassy parks on one side and the beach on the other.

We watch the people go by, and Caelan snorts.

“Fuckin’ LA,” he comments. “There’s always gotta be those dicks who think they’re better than everyone else.”

I hadn’t even noticed, too busy enjoying my time with them and trying to keep my heart from fluttering too hard to care about what anyone else might be doing. “Who?”

Elias casts a sidelong glance at Caelan and attempts to hurry us along. “Some muscle heads at the beach. It’s no concern of ours.” That last part of the sentence is particularly pointed.

“I don’t like humans who think they need to put others down to feel superior. Nothing but sanitized bullies,” Caelan says with a sneer. “God. I could go fuck ’em up so bad.”

“Um.” That seems somewhat ironic coming from him.

“People like that piss me off.”

“Everyone pisses you off, Caelan,” Elias says, a touch exasperated. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I’m not gonna murder ’em,” Caelan replies with a roll of his eyes. “I’m not gonna do jack. They’re showing off like they’re hot shit. I could go over there and one-up them so hard without even trying. I’m not *going* to. I thought it’d be hilarious, that’s all. Yeesh.”

I laugh at the idea of Caelan, muscular but lean, casually showing off his inhuman strength. It’s not like I exactly *mind* seeing either of them do that sort of thing, but again, it seems hypocritical given the situation. “Doesn’t that make you the show off, though?”

“Yeah, but I actually *am* hot shit.” As if that makes it totally reasonable.

Elias looks pained. “Why do I even put up with you?”

“His modesty, charm, and winning personality, obviously,” I suggest.

Caelan narrows his eyes, and I shriek out a laugh as he lifts me, tossing me over his shoulder. “Are you being sarcastic about me, doll?”

“No!” I protest, squirming in his grip. I can’t deny that I love it when they manhandle me, and I giggle at the teasing. But we *are* in public, and I don’t

want to make too much of a scene. “I adore your personality. Put me down!”

“Oh, really?”

“I might have been being sarcastic about the modesty.”

“That’s what I fuckin’ thought.”

It’s difficult with the way he has me slung over his shoulder, but I wriggle my way back down and turn enough so I can kiss the side of his face. “Your confidence is sexy, though.”

“Confidence or arrogance?” Elias comments dryly.

“You have *no* room to talk about arrogance.” Caelan scoffs.

I lightly nudge Caelan, wriggling again, and he sets me back on my feet. I brush myself down, a little ruffled but also rather giddy.

As for their conversation, I’m not exactly going to deny they can both have their moments of being arrogant. But then again, arrogance implies overconfidence, and they’re both powerful enough that none of their confidence is an exaggeration.

Besides, even when Caelan is a smug shit, he’s hot as hell. And Elias, God. Elias wields his power like a weapon. But they’ve never been assholes about it, not around me. They don’t *have* to try hard or show off. That’s the difference. It’s not posturing. The casual, understated moments that reveal their strength are what really get me. Like how they danced with me last night, tossing me in the air like I weighed nothing at all. The way they play-fought, obviously messing around for fun, but showing so much strength and skill in just that much.

They could destroy me in an instant if they chose. Of course, they could, but I trust them enough to believe they *wouldn’t*, and to put my life in their hands willingly makes my chest tighten and my knees feel weak.

It’s far from the first time I’ve realized it, and it certainly won’t be the last, but I’m far too into them.

Now that I’m back on solid ground, Elias slides his arm around my waist. He’s looking at me with an amused light in his eyes, like he can guess the

direction of my thoughts just from the slightly glazed, distant look on my face.

What were we even talking about?

They let the matter drop, the conversation shifting instead to pleasantries.

“This beach reminds me of others I used to go to when I was younger. I always liked clambering over the rocky headlands as much as the sandy beaches, and dumb shit like swimming in the ocean, making sandcastles, scaling deceptively sheer cliffs to collect pretty rocks.”

Elias and Caelan look at me with concern. “And you thought that was a good idea? For a human? *A kid?*”

“Look, I told you I have no sense of self-preservation.”

Given how late we left, it is decidedly past lunchtime already, so we stop at an open-air café along the oceanfront walkway. Elias doesn't eat. I suppose it's much like them and sleeping. They can, for the enjoyment of the experience, but it's not strictly a requirement in the same way. Caelan, on the other hand, is delighted to be able to indulge in a greasy cheeseburger instead of high-end cuisine for once.

I'm happy about the less-than-healthy indulgence as well. After all the exertion of last night and this morning, I need something filling.

Elias treats us to dessert afterward, which he does finally partake in, and with only a small amount of cajoling on my part. We share an ice cream sundae between the three of us.

Elias' favorite flavor is chocolate. I duck my head to hide my grin and pretend I don't find that adorable.

Sufficiently sated, we resume our stroll, and the closer we get to Venice Beach, the more the atmosphere livens. Colorful art stalls pop up on one side of the street, and an assortment of shops open along the other. There are a lot of generic souvenir shops, but there are also some that are far more eclectic and interesting, such as the metalwork shop with robot characters taller than I am, welded together from pieces of scrap.

Elias and Caelan occasionally make comments on the things we pass in varying degrees between dry wit and crude, depending on who started the exchange. I walk between them, grinning to myself.

The prevalence of tourist attractions begins to peter out, mostly behind us by the time we reach the fishing pier. I hardly mind that it's quieter, though. A small handful of walkers loiter along the pier's length, along with one or two lone anglers in the fishing bays. None pay any mind to the three of us, and once we reach the very end of the pier, we're entirely alone.

It's nice out here, surrounded by the ocean on almost every side.

Feeling bolder with no one around to watch, I raise my hand to touch Elias' face. It's odd when I stop to pay attention to it. How *human* he looks. He is almost like a different person, even though his features are the same as ever.

They only use their glamour when we're out, and there are usually enough other people around and plenty happening to distract from it, and that's fine. Easy enough to tune it out.

But I don't think I could sleep with them like this.

The more I get to know them, who they really are, the more the human disguises seem unnatural and unfit for them.

I wonder if they feel the same way about wearing them. It had come up before, in a roundabout way, when I'd been probing about the whole groupie thing. Caelan had said they'd tried it in the past, but it wasn't worth the effort. They'd had to keep playing at being human the whole time, and it made the entire thing feel fake and shitty for them.

I get it now.

"Take the glamour off?" I request softly. I'd understand if he declines. We're still in public, after all, and even if there's no one else around now, others could walk close enough to notice at any time.

Elias lets the illusion fade away, returning to his ashen skin and the faint shroud of the shadows surrounding him, warping the air. "Do you prefer

this?”

“Yeah. A lot. I, um... I wanted to kiss you, but it’s weird when you don’t look like... you.”

Caelan laughs at my other side. He’s dropped his glamour too, and it’s even more noticeable with him. The claws, the point to his ears, the sharp teeth. Those eyes. Neither of them is human.

“You’re sweet, doll. You don’t know how much that means,” he says lightly, dismissive of his own words, but he’s serious, however much he might try to pretend he’s not. “It sucks having to pretend to be something you hate constantly.”

“Humans aren’t that bad, surely?”

He huffs a short laugh. “Didn’t mean it like that. Bad wording. It’s *this* human...” he pulls the glamour up again for a second before letting it immediately fall away, “... that I hate.”

I reach out and touch the back of his hand, then twine my fingers together with his. He looks surprised for a moment but squeezes my hand in return.

They’ve never talked about it. Not that first night, not since. I know they’re stuck here in this dimension, playing as humans when they’d clearly rather exist as themselves, but I still don’t know *why*.

I glance between Caelan and Elias. “You don’t have to answer, but if it’s okay to ask... why are you trapped here like this?”

Elias hesitates a long moment before answering, and I’m ready to apologize for bringing it up at all when he finally speaks. “Parts of our souls *are* human.”

Oh. He’s being entirely serious, and the weight with which he says it betrays how reluctant he is to tell me. Caelan has turned away altogether like it’s an ugly admission he’d rather not face.

“What does that mean? How does that happen?”

“Not by fuckin’ choice,” Caelan says bitterly.

Elias gives a humorless chuckle. He reaches out and tucks a strand of my

hair behind my ear, carefully evaluating me. “Do you really wish to know? It’s difficult to explain when your worldview is so limited.”

“Try? Please? I’d like to understand as much as I can.”

“You humans have no concept of what souls are. You lack the very fundamentals.”

“Then explain. I’ll listen.”

Maybe I’m pushing too much. Elias is expressionless and aloof, but the shadowy aura of his power seems more volatile than usual. I can’t tell if he’s trying to suppress irritation or find the right words.

“Why?” he asks, eventually.

“Because you’re important to me. I want to know about you.”

Another long pause. “The problem is that you view your world as a material existence when all matter is merely an embodiment of energy, and that energy is inherently encoded with information. Other dimensions, for example, are less material planes of existence so much as alternative frequencies at which the energy is interacting.”

“Oh, jeez,” Caelan complains. “You really gonna try to explain this shit? It doesn’t matter how or why things work. They just *do*. Like humans don’t need to fully comprehend the theory of goddamn relativity to get the general gist of gravity being a thing.”

“If she wants me to explain, there’s no harm in trying.”

“Waste of time,” Caelan dismisses.

The corner of Elias’ mouth twitches up. “*You* don’t have to listen.”

“I know I probably won’t get it,” I admit. “But I’m still interested.”

“He’s frustrated since the finer details of these concepts are beyond him too.”

“*Hey.*”

“Hush,” Elias says. Then he returns his attention to me, hesitating for a moment. “I don’t know how to explain in a way that will be accessible for you. This might be... dense.”

“Like you,” Caelan pipes up, and I choke on a quiet giggle.

Elias ignores him. “A soul is energy, as anything else, with a unique frequency or energy signature that defines it as belonging to an individual. You don’t have a word or concept to encompass the true nature of the information such energy carries. In any case, physical form manifests from that energy. Your quaint human notion of soul mates doesn’t truly exist. However, the energetic frequencies of an individual can resonate with others that complement their own.”

I feel rather out of my depth already, trying to process what he is saying. I always preferred biology and chemistry over physics, which is what this sounds most like with his talk of energy and frequencies. *Demon metaphysics*.

Well, being with them really is never boring.

“All right,” I say, after taking a moment to digest that first piece of information.

Elias smiles. “That is in very simplistic terms. It simply happens that a very small fraction of an energy frequency that would be defined as ‘human’ became... hmm. Are you at all familiar with quantum entanglement? The concept is similar.”

“Quantum entanglement?” I echo. And here I thought I was joking about demon metaphysics being a thing.

“Inexorably linked. The energy of that human soul became entangled with the energy of mine. Whatever and whoever it may have been before is irrelevant. That energy is now part of me and is intrinsic to who I am. I would not be who I am now without it. There is no separating it because it is not separate from myself.”

“You can’t even call us, like, part demon, part human. It doesn’t work like that. And also, if you call me human, I’ll fuckin’ punt ya.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” I say, offering a small, supportive smile to Caelan.

“He is correct. We are something else entirely, neither one nor the other.”

“Like... a cake?” I suggest.

Elias slowly raises an eyebrow. “How so?”

I laugh at his bemused expression. “I mean. You have separate, distinct ingredients to make a cake, right? Sugar, butter, eggs, and flour, whatever. But combine them together and cook them and what you end up with is something new entirely. Utterly unrecognizable as any of its components, and it’s completely impossible to ever get any of the original ingredients back out. Cake is cake, not sugar and butter and eggs and flour. And you’re Elias, not mostly demon Elias and some part human.”

Caelan sniggers. “That’s *adorable*.”

Elias considers this. “I suppose so. The basic notion is not incorrect if you apply the same concept to energy instead of matter.”

Caelan perks up, much more interested in the conversation. “What kind of cake would Elias be?”

“I think you’re missing the point, Caelan,” Elias says.

I laugh. “A super rich, dark chocolate cake, with some strawberries and different fruits on top.”

“I’d eat that.”

“You’d eat anything. Also, please don’t literally eat Elias.”

“I’d eat him *out*, literally,” Caelan amends, and I choke back an inelegant snort.

Elias is looking at the two of us with a mix of amusement and exasperation. The conversation has gotten a tad derailed, I’ll admit, but maybe that’s for the best. I still have so many questions. *How does that even happen, for one?* But Elias is a very private person, and I’ve pried enough.

I lean in and press a soft kiss to his lips. “Thank you, though. For taking the time to explain.”

Elias grips my waist and lifts me just enough to sit me on the wooden railing along the edge of the pier. He keeps his hands there, steadying me. My knees frame his hips, and the extra height makes me slightly taller than him

—a perfect position to rest my forehead against his.

There's so much more I could say—how I appreciate his growing willingness to open up, what it means to me, how much I care for them. But the right words are hard to find, and I don't want to get too stupidly sappy in case they're not comfortable with that.

So instead, I let him kiss me, melting into it as he pries my lips apart and thoroughly tastes every inch of my mouth for several minutes straight.

Elias eventually draws away with a chuckle, leaving me speechless and flustered. "People," he warns.

"Huh?" I blink dumbly before realizing he's referring to the approach of a few walkers heading up the pier. Elias and Caelan seamlessly return their glamours to place, and Elias helps me down, my face still red.

"We should start heading back anyway," he says.

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Chapter Twelve

Now that Elias has mentioned it, I'm conscious that the time for the upcoming gala is steadily drawing close. It's already taken a good while to get this far. An hour of casual strolling, plus the longer stop for food, then pausing at the end of the pier. I'm not worried about being late, though. We're presumably going to be traveling back the way we came, through the abyss, and we can do that from any point Elias and Caelan choose.

That's not a problem. It's more the gala itself. I'd rather focus on my time with the two of them than be nervous about that, though.

Instead of walking back the way we came, we agree that it would be nice to walk along the beach, right down by the water's edge. I take off my boots and roll my leggings up to my knees, so I can feel the sand beneath my feet and let the last little reach of the ocean's waves wrap around my ankles.

Caelan kicks off his boots as well. Elias doesn't take off his shoes, but he removes his jacket and rolls up his shirt sleeves, and my stomach twists into a knot again for a moment. He's gorgeous. Those forearms, his strong hands, *fuck*. It's embarrassing as hell, but damn, they make me desperate to be pinned down by him whenever I see them.

Well, that's something for this evening, perhaps.

Caelan shoves his boots at Elias for him to hold, then joins me in the surf. Elias merely rolls his eyes. Then Caelan's boots, my boots, and Elias' jacket

are gone. Casually placed aside into the abyss or some semi-alternative dimension Elias can still access.

It's a small gesture, but it makes my heart sing that Elias is getting comfortable with casual, thoughtless demonstrations of his capabilities after the argument about it earlier.

Caelan doesn't seem to care in the slightest about getting his jeans wet. He walks beside me, unflinching when the waves splash up his calves. He's more interested in teasingly kicking the water up to make me laugh and yell. Caelan picks me up and spins me around, threatening to toss me in, then cackles when I cling to him.

"Caelan!" I half-heartedly complain. I'm smiling too much for the protest to have any weight behind it whatsoever.

Caelan grins, eyes alight with mischief. "Wanna see something super fucking cool?"

"I am *highly* suspicious, but all right. Just don't dunk me in the ocean."

His gaze darts back up the beach, checking for other people. The tide is low, and a huge sandbank cuts off the main beach from the ocean's edge almost the entire way along, leaving us hidden from sight down here. Caelan catches Elias' eyes and simply smirks. He's not asking for permission for whatever he's about to do because he's going to do it regardless, but Elias resignedly waves his hand in a gesture for Caelan to go ahead anyway.

I don't have time to worry about what on earth he has planned. Caelan lifts me again and throws me, much the same way as when we were play-fighting last night, directly out above the water.

For one heart-stopping moment, fear flashes through me. And irritation. *I explicitly said I didn't want to end up in the ocean, dammit.* Caelan vanishes with a crackle like lightning and reappears in front of me, catching me in his arms.

Above the water.

The momentum pushes us back, but he has me safely in his lap. My eyes

widen in shock. There's a moment where I forget to breathe because *what the fuck*.

He's—

Caelan is sitting cross-legged, holding me across his lap on top of the water. No, not quite on top. He's *floating* a few inches above the water, far enough beyond the waves that the surface is almost entirely still. Every hair on my body stands on end, my skin prickling and electrified by the sheer amount of static energy Caelan generates. His demonic form is almost vibrating with the way he's thrumming with electricity. His eyes, normally almost luminescent at the best of times, are glowing outright and narrowed in concentration.

"Holy shit." I breathe in absolute awe. My knees were pulled up to my chest, easier to let him hold me fully, but now I uncurl one leg away and dip my toe down into the water as if testing if he's for real.

He's literally just holding me over the ocean.

Caelan smiles, baring his teeth with the effort. He leans in and briefly kisses me, but makes up for that with how heated and immediately rough it is. Enough to make my head spin and an abrupt shock of lust curl through my gut. And there is a literal shock—the static bites sharply between us, and I gasp against his lips.

I don't have the time to reorient myself before I'm in the air again. Caelan repeats the process in reverse, tossing me, then darting ahead to catch me on the shore. He wobbles, drained from the exertion, and we end up tumbling into the sand and rolling together until I find myself sprawled on the beach with Caelan on top of me.

"What the *hell* was that?" I ask, breathless.

Caelan is panting heavily. This is the first time I've ever seen him strain to do anything, but he's also incredibly damn smug and pleased with himself. "Negative ionic charge," he says between deep breaths. "Generated enough to repel against the ocean."

“That’s... holy shit,” I murmur again. Of course, I knew they were capable of some amazing feats, being demons and all, but that was *not* one I was expecting. He’s absolutely taken my breath away.

Caelan leans down and kisses me. Not quite as intense as when we were out on the water, but it lasts a lot longer this time. Reaching up, I tangle my hands into his hair, moaning softly.

“Are you done?” Elias asks, interrupting us. He doesn’t sound impatient or annoyed, though. Despite himself and how thoroughly unnecessary the spectacle was, I can tell he’s impressed with Caelan as well.

Caelan rolls off me and flops down into the sand at my side instead, and Elias sits at my other side with significantly more grace.

“That was incredible,” I inform Caelan. “I had no idea you could do anything like that.”

“Neither did I until I tried it just now,” he replies with an utterly shit-eating grin.

“You... Caelan! What if it hadn’t worked?”

He laughs. “Have some faith in me, doll.”

I shake my head, but I’m grinning as well. “You’re something else,” I say.

“That was a very impressive and inventive maneuver,” Elias agrees dryly. “If blatantly showing off.”

It’s amusing to think about, really. Caelan is showing off. There’s no doubt about that, but Elias has been as well, just in a much more subtle way. The fancy restaurant dates, dancing with me last night. It’s almost as though Caelan’s trying to one-up him, like they’re trying to compete for my affection. Sweet, but entirely unnecessary.

Don’t they know I’m already theirs, and I adore them both?

I take Caelan’s hand and tangle our fingers together.

Elias looks down at the two of us with a wry expression. “We barely walked ten minutes. Do you really require another break already?”

“Let’s see you walk on goddamn water and not need a sec after,” Caelan shoots back.

“That’s fair. However, we don’t have a great amount of time left.” Elias’ thoughts seem to have followed the same path as mine regarding how long there is before the gala.

Butterflies churn in my stomach at the reminder.

“I... don’t mind,” I say slowly. “I know you have to get back, but it doesn’t bother me so much if I’m late for the big event part.”

“Huh? I thought you were looking forward to it. You don’t sound very enthusiastic.”

“Mmm... you guys aren’t going to be there, though. Elias has his part to play on stage, and you’re not coming, so I don’t know. It shouldn’t really bother me. It’s not like I don’t go places and do everything by myself all the time anyway. I can go and still have fun on my own.”

“But it is bothering you,” Elias says.

I sigh. “You spoil me. I just got a taste of what it’s like to enjoy spending time around people I trust and care about, and going back after that is just lonely at first, that’s all.”

“Hmm. Will there not be people there you can converse with?”

“Well, yeah, I’m just... not so good at that.”

Caelan scoffs. “You were fine with us.”

“It’s not that I *can’t* talk to people. I’m okay at being friendly, just not actually making friends. Even Grace, my friend from work, and I only spend time together for convenience. I’ve seen her outside of work all of twice. And if I left, I know we wouldn’t keep in contact. I never do. I... I don’t really know how to connect to anyone anymore, that’s all. You guys are the first people I’ve felt any actual honest attachment to in a very long time. Being with you makes me *happy*. I’d forgotten people could do that instead of being draining.”

Caelan rolls over and props himself up on his elbow, staring at me. “Who

do I need to murder?” he asks in absolute seriousness.

“Wh-what?”

“Did someone hurt you to make you afraid of people like that? I’ll fuckin’ kill them.”

“Caelan! Jeez. No, it’s nothing like that. I’m stupid and awkward. It’s not —”

“Gimme the names of your exes. I’ll track ’em down.”

“*Caelan*. Nobody did anything wrong. No exes, nothing.” I hesitate. “I was once called, and I quote, ‘an immensely irritating person to be around.’ That kind of sucked. That was just some old friends, though, a very long time ago. High school bullshit. We’ve all moved on and grown up since then.”

“Have you moved on?” Elias asks quietly.

The question is a little too astute. I don’t answer it, deflecting back to my original point. “I struggle to click with people. That’s all it is. I tried relationships. My first boyfriend was more a matter of going through the motions. I dated him because I thought I should, because it’s such a huge life goal and expectation, you know? And I got sick of the ‘have you got a boyfriend yet’ and ‘don’t worry, you’ll find someone.’ He was nice enough. I liked him, don’t get me wrong, but he grew sick of me, too, in the end. I can’t blame him and wasn’t even sorry to see him go. Definitely not murder-worthy, I promise.”

I punctuate the last point with a meaningful look at Caelan. He had been wearing such an angry, murderous expression before that I don’t doubt he’d follow through on the threat, and I’ll say as much as I need to talk him down.

“The point is, no one did anything wrong. If anything, *I’m* the problem. Like that saying goes...” My eyebrows furrow as I struggle to recall at least a vague approximation. “If everywhere you go smells like shit, check your own shoes. Um... sorry. I forgot it was crude.”

Caelan, at least, drops some of his aggression in favor of a guffaw.

“I have spent the better part of two decades with Caelan. Crudeness is of

no concern,” Elias assures me.

“Right. But the common denominator is me. There’s something about how I communicate, relate to people, or just *am*, that is a little bit... wrong. So, I stopped putting in the effort. It’s easier to be a little lonely than to be left over and over again.”

Elias gives a low, thoughtful hum, and I immediately turn to him and cut him off before he can speak.

“It’s not important,” I insist. “This is just part of being human. We’ve all got some baggage. In the grand scheme of things, I’m doing damn well for myself compared to many others. I’m comfortable with the way things are. Getting nervous about the gala means nothing.”

The corner of Elias’ mouth twitches up into a small half-smile. “You say you are ‘wrong’ when talking to two literal demonic abominations.”

He has a point. His tone is not remotely admonishing or judgmental, yet I abruptly feel foolish for speaking so thoughtlessly.

Then again, maybe that is the very reason I feel as comfortable with them as I do. Two wrongs don’t make a right, but maybe three wrongs that are messed up in just the right complementary ways do.

I shake my head. “In any case, that’s all there is to it. I’m not going burden you with my stupid human worries. It’s not even that bothersome for me. I’m socially awkward, but I’m fine by myself.”

Elias seizes my wrists, startling me. I thought I had gotten away with it, and the conversation was over, but he pins my hands against the sand on either side of my head and leans over me with an intensity in his eyes that makes my heart skip. “Do you not think it’s fair that our agreement goes both ways?” he asks.

“What?”

“You were particularly adamant that we allow you to ‘get to know us.’ As the demons we really are, without any façade. How, then, is it fair that you continue to wear your own masks?”

“Elias, I...” I hadn’t even considered it like that. I’ve already told them plenty, about my life, about myself, and assumed that was enough. But he’s right, in a way. I’ve never really opened up about anything serious. “You’re demons, though. Why on earth would you care about pathetic human shit like that?”

He laughs, although it isn’t particularly warm. “Now, what was it you said earlier? ‘I don’t care what you are. I care about you.’ Hypocrisy doesn’t suit you, my dear.”

I swallow a lump in my throat, my chest feeling far too tight all of a sudden. I knew they cared for me, but if I’m reading between the lines right, the way Elias is talking makes it sound like he cares more than I expected. Far more.

It’s the difference between caring about me on the surface, as someone fun to be around and a good lay, and caring about me in all my weaknesses, ugliness, and vulnerabilities too. The former I was comfortable with, the latter hits me hard.

“Darling?” Elias murmurs. His hand shifts from my wrist to cup my face instead.

“I’m sorry. I’m okay.”

Caelan gives the two of us a suspicious look. “Am I gonna have to murder Elias for upsetting you too?”

I giggle, still choked up. “No. I’m just not used to anyone caring that much. You caught me off guard, is all.”

“I still think there’s someone I should murder.”

“Caelan, *no*.”

“Not all problems can be solved with murder,” Elias agrees.

“Yeah, but it damn well helps you feel better about it.”

I laugh, then hesitate for a long, drawn-out moment. “I did think about it,” I admit. I’ve never told anyone before, but somehow it doesn’t seem so terrible in the face of two demons. “Killing them. It’s weird. I never felt any

real vitriol toward them. They taught me that I wasn't someone people wanted to be around, and I guess I just internalized all of that. But I used to imagine pushing them in front of a train or something. Not out of resentment, but just to erase them, erase the past, erase all of it."

Regathering myself, I push the thought away. "God, I haven't even thought about that in years. Why am I even telling you this? This wasn't how this conversation was meant to go."

Elias smiles, and his lips gently ghost against mine. "Better," he says. "You don't have to hide from us."

It still makes me feel vulnerable and unsettled, opening up about things that should be utterly insignificant to them. So instead of talking further, I kiss Elias back. It's easier than trying to deal with my feelings.

The amount of interest and willingness to listen they've shown is more than I had ever expected. Not knowing how to express my appreciation aloud, I pour all my gratitude into the kiss.

I wrap my arms around Elias' shoulders, clutching at him as the kiss quickly becomes heated, but not long-lived. Caelan interrupts with a huff and a pointed cough, and I grin as Elias pulls away. Caelan immediately swoops in for a kiss as well.

Between the two of them, I end up breathless all over again.

"All right," Elias finally says. "The original point remains. We do not have much time available. We should get a move on if you want to spend any time at the pier proper."

I don't really mind if I'm here with them. Anything is fine. I wouldn't complain about lying on the beach and making out, but I obligingly push myself to my feet and brush the sand off.

Elias wraps an arm around my waist, giving me a devastating smile as he presses a gentle kiss to the top of my head. Dammit, he's good. If I weren't already addicted to them, that brief interlude would have hooked my heart for sure.

God. It's been so long since I've felt anything like this, being so completely head over heels for anyone. It's terrifying and wonderful, and I hate feeling so damn helpless to the whims of my heart. I can't do anything about it.

All I can do is enjoy it while it lasts.

Because I can't lie to myself. The more it feels like they care about me, that there's almost some chance of this working out as a real thing, the more scared I am of losing it all.

I hold their hands, Elias and Caelan on either side of me, and just breathe.

Some of the gray haze has cleared, and the mid-afternoon sun washes over the beach and bathes it in warmth. The sand stretches out in front of us as far as the eye can see, and Caelan is impatient already.

"How freakin' far is it back?" he complains, reminding me of a child whining on a car journey, and I laugh.

"It took us an hour to get as far as we did. It will take the same time to return," Elias says, with far more patience than Caelan has.

"All right, look. The beach is pretty and shit, but I've had my fun messing around, and I can't be bothered to walk for that long. Unless you really want to hang around for whatever reason, I vote we take a shortcut through the abyss back to the pier."

I grin. "I'm good. I've had my fill of beach too." I'm pretty sure I have sand in my hair from tumbling around with Caelan when he caught me after the little ocean experiment. I'd rather not hang around and get sand in even worse places.

Elias, however, doesn't seem quite so enthused about the plan. "Just because I will allow some travel by that method in necessary circumstances does not mean I think it's a good idea to use it constantly on any whim."

"Whatever," Caelan says, then scoops me up. I yelp and wrap my arms around his neck. "Catch us if you can, old man."

"Caelan—" I attempt to protest. *Too late.*

My stomach flips as the world drops out from beneath me. I didn't even have time to close my eyes.

Not that there's anything to see, only darkness so deep it feels like it would devour the first hint of light that dared disturb its utter completion. Yet I can't shake the idea that there's something beyond my vision. Something beyond my comprehension, and if I could see it amongst the endless black, it would drive me insane to even gaze upon it. It makes me nauseous, this momentarily glimpse of a world that shouldn't exist.

'Gaze into the abyss,' as the saying goes, and I choke on a sound halfway between a laugh and terrified whimper I can't bite back.

I really don't like the abyss very much.

Caelan sets me down on the beach where we emerge, the same place as we'd appeared upon our first arrival. I find myself sinking to my knees in the sand, my legs shaking too much to hold me up.

Oh. I hadn't even realized.

Elias is already here. For all Caelan's taunts of 'catch us if you can,' Elias either beat us here or arrived instantaneously. He grips Caelan's hair and tugs his head back harshly.

"That was utterly irresponsible," Elias snaps.

"Ouch! Cut it out. I was just playin' around."

Elias grits his teeth and releases Caelan with a shove. "*Think* before you act. She wasn't ready."

"I-I'm okay," I say through my chattering teeth.

Elias helps me to my feet, and I find myself automatically leaning into him. Partially because I'm still shaky and partially because there's something incredibly comforting about the way his shadows, like an aura surrounding him, brush against my skin. More so than usual. It's like they're actively reaching out, washing away the lingering sensations of the abyss that I hadn't even realized were clinging to me.

"Did you even remember to use your own energy to shield her?" Elias

says scathingly.

Caelan scowls and says nothing, and Elias sighs.

“I’m okay,” I insist again. “No harm done.”

Elias hesitates for a long moment, gradually relaxing as I recover. He watches the color return to my face, finally sighing. “None now. But one day, there might be.”

Caelan’s fingers twitch by his side. He’s avoiding looking at Elias and having trouble looking at me. “Sorry,” he mutters. It’s obvious he’s uncomfortable and unused to having to apologize for anything. The fact he’s even making an effort for me is oddly endearing. “Should’ve asked or whatever. Forget humans ain’t so used to dimensional shit.”

I leave Elias’ embrace and tightly hug Caelan instead. He blinks in surprise, not sure what to do with the abrupt affection.

“I’m fine. It’s fine. I would prefer if you did warn me before doing that again, but I’m not upset or anything. Thanks for apologizing.”

“Oh. Sure. You’re welcome, I guess?”

Elias huffs a short, wry laugh. His amusement at Caelan’s discomfort and awkward attempts at an apology seems to have, momentarily at least, outweighed his initial anger at Caelan’s recklessness. “I don’t think I’ve ever gotten an apology from you so quickly. Normally it’s like pulling teeth.”

“That’s ’cause you always gotta be an ass about it,” Caelan grumbles.

“Why don’t we go up to the pier?” I suggest. “That’s what we came for, right?”

“Sure thing, Shan.” Caelan seems glad for the excuse to get away from the conversation and leads the way toward the stairs leading up.

I go to follow immediately after him, but Elias takes my hand to stop me. I turn to him in surprise.

“I apologize also,” he says, voice low. “For snapping at Caelan. I know it must be uncomfortable to witness. I simply find myself... protective of you, and it would pain me greatly to have you harmed because of a moment of

thoughtlessness on his part.”

“It’s okay,” I say, giving him a soft smile.

They’re both demons. I know that. I’ve known it all along, and I know they’ll never going to be perfect at the whole emotion thing. But they’re trying—Caelan apologizing so readily and Elias wanting to protect me. It feels like they are, and I’m convinced their hearts are in the right place.

They care, don’t they?

Elias returns my boots as we reach the steps, and I brush the sand from my feet as best I can before pulling them back on. Caelan doesn’t bother, apparently having no qualms about simply wandering around barefoot. I wish I’d thought to do that too, as it’s only a pier and not the weirdest place to walk about with no shoes. Not that I ought to care about what people think of something so insignificant.

I admire Caelan’s self-confidence and how little he gives a shit about what others think of him. God, I could use some more of that. Of course, it’s probably because he has the capacity to simply destroy anyone who rubs him the wrong way.

As morbid as the thought is, I grin.

Caelan responds in kind, smirking back at me as we head into the crowds. It’s busier here than the rest of the walk. Not packed to the point of it being an irritation, but there’s a steady flow of people around.

I’m content with simply wandering. We pass by the rather impressive old carousel housed in a building close to the beach end of the pier, and Elias offers to pay for a ticket for me. I laugh and decline. It wouldn’t be any fun to go on my own, and I can’t even imagine Elias or Caelan on a goddamn carousel, of all things. Just trying to picture it cracks me up, and Caelan ends up laughing with me when I wheeze out an explanation of what has me so amused.

I pass on the rides further up the pier for the same reason, although Caelan seems moderately interested in the rollercoaster. It’s not big or

impressive enough for him to have any incentive to go on it, though. I do consider the Ferris wheel since that seems like a standard, romantic sort of venture. But I decide against it, wanting to give Elias' pride a break. He's been indulgent enough already, and the boxy cabins in bright primary colors seem somewhat childish compared to his usual refined taste.

Honestly, it's fun enough to take in the sights and the atmosphere with both of them by my side.

The arcade is more where the party is at. While Elias is content to follow and simply watch, Caelan is more enthusiastic about joining me in shooting some computerized zombies. For a time, at least. I can't say I'm exactly good at the game we picked out to play, but I don't feel like I need to be.

Caelan, apparently, does. After our third game, he gets frustrated and grumbles about dumb games that lack the satisfaction of the warmth of actual blood and guts on his hands.

I think he's being hyperbolic. Mostly.

Elias steps in at that point.

Caelan was not bad at whatever generic zombie game we were playing. He was on the better end of average, taking delight in pumping the twisted monsters full of lead. He mowed them down enthusiastically until he ran out of bullets.

Elias, on the other hand, is precise, calculated, and an incredible shot. He waits for the perfect openings and destroys each enemy with a single headshot, taking advantage of their weaknesses.

I get my character killed by staring at Elias instead of paying attention to what I'm doing, but damn. Even though he's only playing some arcade game, he has the stance, casual but powerful, the concentration, and a quiet, smug satisfaction when he clears the level with more than enough ammo to spare.

He hands the plastic gun back to Caelan and steps away from the machine, smoothing his shirt down.

"Goddamn show off," Caelan mutters, with no proper heat from the

accusation. He was captivated by the performance himself.

“You, of all people, should know the value of being proficient in at least one weapon,” Elias says.

I’m still looking at Elias more than the screen. Caelan and I are both guilty of that, and after getting another game over by being thoroughly distracted watching Elias simply straighten out and reroll his sleeves, we decide to stop throwing money at the game.

Wandering around the arcade, I dabble in a few more amusements, but nothing really captures my attention until I find a claw machine filled with oversized, cuddly toys and beam with delight.

“Those are rigged as fuck,” Caelan comments as I attempt to win a large stuffed panda.

“Shh, I know.”

He watches me fail at it twice before finding the need to interfere too irresistible.

“You want that one?” he asks, leaning over. He’s pressed right behind me, the hard lines of his body warm against the length of mine. It’s distracting enough that I almost end up throwing my attempt worse than usual, but I eventually maneuver the claw into a decent position.

The machine sparks slightly, groaning and whirring. The claw descends, jerks, and grips tightly for once. Tight enough not to let the toy slide away, like in my previous attempts.

I turn to squint at Caelan. “Did you glitch out the machine?”

“The dumb thing is cheating you to start with. I evened out the playing field.” He grins smugly, wordlessly exposing that he had absolutely everything to do with it.

I collect my slightly ill-gotten prize, smoothing down the soft fur of the large panda plushie I now own. I offer it to Caelan. “Here. You won her.”

“Uh. Didn’t you want it?”

“I... didn’t exactly think this through. She’s a little big to be taking back

with me. And I don't really have room for an oversized plushie. What would I do with her?"

Caelan snorts. "And what would *I* do with it?"

"I don't know. At least you have the whole abyss pocket dimension thing to keep stuff in. All I have is a shitty apartment."

"I'm pretty sure that it's usually meant to be the dude winning cute plushie shit for the girl in this situation," he points out.

"Okay, just for that heteronormative bullshit, you now *have* to take her."

"I'd use it for stabbing practice."

I give a mock gasp and cover the toy panda's ears. "Don't say that! You'll hurt her feelings."

Elias gives a quiet chuckle. "How adorable. You seem to protest more about Caelan stabbing your toy than when he mentions stabbing actual people."

My stomach does an uncomfortable flip as I realize Elias is right. Of course, I'm exaggerating for humor, but that is a little messed up. I'm certain Elias was also joking, but his statement is more accurate than I care to admit.

I glance down at the panda in my arms, then up at Elias. "You should take her," I say. "We clearly can't trust Caelan."

Elias quirks an eyebrow. "Why would I want a stuffed panda?"

"Because it's a gift. You're always paying for stuff for me, all the fancy meals out and everything, and I've never given you anything in return. It's not even like this is a big deal. It'd just be nice for you to get something back, don't you think?"

"Darling, you've given me yourself," Elias replies, voice low and a crooked smile on his face.

"W-well, yes. But. Just." I swallow, suddenly flustered. I hold out the panda to him. "You should take her because she's got eyes like yours. It's cute."

There's a moment of silence while Caelan admirably attempts to restrain

himself, but he ends up busting a gut anyway. His laughter is so infectious that I bite my lip to stop a stupid grin from spreading over my face.

The corner of Elias' mouth twitches with barely concealed amusement. "I see," he says smoothly. He takes the panda and regards it, and the next moment the toy is swallowed by a flash of darkness.

I hope he put it aside into the abyss and didn't destroy the thing.

Caelan catches the touch of concern in my expression and stops cackling long enough to comment, "Oh, he's fuckin' keeping it."

The rest of our wander around the pier is enjoyable but relatively uneventful unless you count Caelan insisting on calling Elias 'panda eyes' for the rest of the date, much to his own amusement. Elias' less so. But Elias is more tolerant of it than I would have expected. He must be in a good mood.

It makes my heart flutter to think that spending time together could contribute to making him happy.

It's getting to late afternoon, turning to early evening, and the sun is starting to sink. We all agree we need to make our way back to the hotel and start getting ready for the gala.

Elias is the one to take me back through the abyss this time, far slower and more deliberate about it than Caelan was on either occasion. He doesn't tend to pick me up and throw me around as much, so being lifted and held against his chest is a pleasant new experience. The way his shadows caress my skin is enjoyable too. I barely even notice the wrongness and the sickening sensation that comes with moving through the abyss when all my attention is on Elias.

"Thank you," I say as he puts me back down on my feet in the hotel room, and I press a soft kiss to his lips. "That was a wonderful date. I had fun."

Caelan is grinning, just watching us. "You're so adorable."

"Indeed," Elias agrees, a quiet laugh in his voice. "Now, dear. The gala," he reminds me. "Go and get ready."

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Chapter Thirteen

We probably should have left more time to get changed. Technically, the gala is already open for arrival, although no major events begin until a little later. But either way, I'm all too aware I shouldn't waste much time.

I collect my dress. I'm prepared to rush through the shower and hastily get ready, but Caelan's next words stop me in my tracks.

"You got, like, a spare suit or something?" he asks Elias, and we both look at him in bewilderment.

"What for?" Elias questions, eyebrows furrowed.

Caelan rolls his eyes in response to being stared at. "For the dumb gala thing, what d'you think for?"

"I thought you weren't coming," I say.

Caelan shrugs. "Maybe I changed my mind, whatever, it's not like it matters. I don't exactly have anything to wear for it."

I want to be happy about it, but there's still something reserved in his voice. "Caelan, you don't have to. If you're coming just for me, that's a sweet gesture, but I don't want you forcing yourself into a situation you're not comfortable in just to keep me company."

"I'm not *uncomfortable*. It's boring and dumb."

"The point definitely still stands."

"The whole gala thing is boring and dumb," Caelan amends. "But what

else am I gonna do, sit around here on my own and jack off?”

I giggle because, frankly, he probably would.

“I enjoy spending time with you, that’s all. Even if it is at some stupid, fancy event.”

“Caelan—”

“Stop making it a big deal. I’ll come with you, whatever.”

“Is... this because of what I said on the beach?”

Caelan gives me a lazy scowl and flicks me on the forehead. “What part of stop making it a big deal ain’t ya getting?”

Elias intervenes by gently guiding me toward the bathroom. “I wouldn’t try arguing with him. He’s stubborn when he’s made up his mind regarding something. Take care of your own preparations.”

I go as directed, a little reluctantly. I will be glad for the company, but not at the expense of Caelan’s comfort. But he insists it’s not a big deal, and I’m going to have to trust that he wouldn’t do something he really didn’t want to just to make me happy. And, honestly, now I think of it that way, Caelan wouldn’t be that selfless. He’s not like me, going along with social situations I don’t care for just for the sake of not rocking the boat. If he really didn’t want to go, he’d damn well not go. He’s a *demon*. Of course, he’ll do whatever he wants.

Reassured by the thought, I briefly shower to get the last of the sand off me. Getting dressed is a quick affair that only requires drying off and sliding into the ballgown. It’s a rich crimson taffeta with floor-length ruffled tiers, a low-cut neckline, and off-the-shoulder sleeves. I’ve never worn it before. I hardly go out, certainly not to events where that level of fancy is appropriate, but for once, I’m relishing the opportunity to look nice instead of feeling out of place.

Somehow, it feels different if it’s for Elias and Caelan. Worth the effort.

Elias has sourced a suit for Caelan too. He must have altered it for the purpose because it fits Caelan too perfectly to be Elias’. And Caelan looks—

he looks so good.

He doesn't look overly *impressed* about being in a suit. Or maybe it's because of the tie that he's still struggling with, scowling and swatting at Elias' hands when Elias attempts to fix it for him.

"I don't even need a goddamn tie," Caelan grumbles.

"It will be better with it. Hold still."

But he does look so fucking good.

I head over to collect my shoes and join them. Elias finishes with the tie and leans back to scrutinize his handiwork. His eyes run slowly over Caelan, taking the time to drink in all of him. Then Elias reaches for the tie again, and Caelan looks like he's about to say something utterly scathing, but Elias only grabs hold of it and yanks Caelan forward into a firm kiss.

I stand there dumbly, halfway through putting on my second high heel, and suddenly unable to tear my eyes away. I know how Elias kisses. I'm intimately familiar with that, but seeing it from the outside is fascinating. I watch the way Elias' lips lock with Caelan's, the flashes of his tongue between them, and I can imagine how he must be exploring Caelan's mouth. And Caelan's hands claw at Elias, but not so much trying to shove him off this time as dragging him closer.

The heat between them is palpable.

It almost makes me feel guilty for getting between them. That's a stupid thought, though, and I shake it off immediately.

Both are flushed and puffing by the time they're done kissing and I'm still just standing here staring.

"What?" Caelan says, turning to me, and my heart skips a beat as I realize the color of his tie exactly matches my dress. Elias must have picked it out especially, and that's such a charming detail.

I bite my lip and grin at him. "You are so damn hot," I inform Caelan.

"What, 'cause of the suit or smoochin' Elias?"

"Both. I mean. You're always hot, but..." I stumble over my words. *Shit.*

“The suit looks good on you.”

“I’m wearing it just for the stupid gala. The second we’re back here, this thing is comin’ off.”

“Oh, *please.*”

Caelan snorts a laugh at that response. “All right, you little minx. Be like that.”

I turn to Elias, who is in his full suit as well—a step up from usual, with a brocade vest beneath his jacket too. God. Compliments on how gorgeous he is don’t do it justice. My mouth feels too dry to speak.

I finally drag my eyes up to meet his, and Elias’ expression makes me feel like I’m melting all over again. He’s looking at me the same way he looked at Caelan, with an appreciation and want that makes heat curl in my gut.

“You look beautiful,” Elias says simply, but there’s a weight of sincerity behind his words, making my heart ache. His hand slides around my waist, pulling me close. “One dance?” he murmurs. “Since I won’t be able to at the gala.”

His charm still manages to be thoroughly disarming, and my face heats up just from the compliment. “You’re going to make yourself late,” I remind him weakly.

Elias considers this with a low hum. “Afterward, then.”

I can only nod my agreement. Elias steps away, and a part of me strongly regrets speaking up. Forget the gala. I’d be happy to stay here with them.

But Elias has his part to play, and I don’t want to be so selfish as to drag him away from his obligations.

Afterward.

“One final touch. I know you dislike the social networking that comes with events such as these, Caelan.”

Caelan snorts quietly under his breath. “That’s an understatement.”

Elias casually twists his fingers, drawing a mask out from nowhere, out of

the shadows, and offers it to Caelan. “It won’t do much, but you may be recognized and approached less with this. *Try to keep a low profile.*”

“Pretty sure it ain’t a masked ball,” Caelan says, nose wrinkling.

“It is now.”

“What about if I had a mask, too,” I speak up. “At least we’d match. It’d be less weird than if Caelan’s the only one wearing one.”

Elias nods. “If you’re willing, dear.”

“Of course. I’ve always wanted to go to a masked ball. It’s not really the same, but a mask would still be cute.”

He tilts his head obligingly and, much like he did with Caelan’s mask, creates one for me. But this time, he makes a show of it. Elias smirks, knowing exactly what he’s doing.

Darkness gathers at his fingertips like liquid shadow, and he gracefully directs it to form the shape and detail of an intricate lace butterfly mask. It solidifies into existence, and Elias offers it to me.

“Pfft,” Caelan comments. “Who’s the one being unnecessary now?”

I take the mask with both hands, staring down at it. It’s lovely, there’s no doubt of that, but more than anything, I’m fascinated by the possibilities. “Can you just... make anything you want like that?”

Elias chuckles. “Darling, I could shift your entire reality if I really wished. A trinket like that is no more effort than blinking.”

My stomach twists into a very strange knot. Of course, I knew they were far beyond human, but at times, it hits me just how powerful they really are.

And they’re spending their time indulging me?

It’s the most incredible rush yet leaves me terrifyingly insecure. They could have anyone, anything, in the entire world, yet I’m the one who gets to be with them? They’re beyond out of my league.

I’m just standing there, staring down at the mask, so Elias takes my hands and guides them up to place it over my eyes. He kisses me firmly before drawing away.

God. I don't deserve him. Don't deserve either of them. *How could I possibly be enough?*

"Whatever you're thinking, Shannon, stop," Elias says softly. "Are you nervous about the gala still?"

That's not it, but I'm happy to go along with the guess. It's a better option than explaining what's really bothering me.

"It's okay. We should get going."

"Time for the fun," Caelan says, with not an ounce of sincerity.

"There's going to be food," I inform him, grinning. Even though Caelan does his best to maintain his aura of bored reluctance, I can almost visibly see him perk up at that.

We part ways with Elias. Then it's just Caelan and I making our way to the ballroom. I take his hand, and he gives me a sidelong glance but doesn't pull away.

I'm overdressed, I realize as we return to the main corridor and join the tide of others funneling into the event. Aside from being the only ones with masks, a ballgown is kind of overkill. Everyone else had a far more modern and sensible interpretation of the 'formal' requirement.

Still, I try to keep my head up. I look good, regardless.

The atmosphere is lively, at least. Full of chatter and people who all seem to know each other, at least on some shallow level. The air is rich with laughter and the clink of champagne glasses. Everyone falls into their own cliques. They don't care if one awkward newcomer falls through the cracks.

I'm glad of that, as I'd rather not be noticed. I stay by Caelan's side, and he likewise avoids interacting with anyone. In this situation, at least, we really are two of a kind.

"Do you really not talk to anyone else?" I murmur to him. "Even just for the sake of business?"

Caelan shrugs. "I let Elias do the schmoozing. I hardly have the disposition for that shit."

I laugh at that. He has a point. “But, for real. Is it just you and Elias? You’re not close to anyone else?”

“From what I gathered on the beach, that’s a bit like the pot callin’ the kettle black, huh, doll? We got our reasons. I’m sure that doesn’t need explaining.”

I nod in acquiescence. It doesn’t.

What gave me the honor of being the one to know them? Learning the truth of what they were by pure chance?

“Caelan...” Amongst the throng of people, we might as well be alone in our own world. We’re invisible to them, not worth the time. “Why did you accept me? Out of everyone you could possibly have known?”

“ ’Cause you accepted us first.”

I have no reply to that.

We drift over to the buffet spread. That’s something we can both enjoy even here, at least. I don’t recognize half of what’s on offer, but Caelan casually drapes himself over a chair and picks at the food without any qualms. He bites an hors d’oeuvre from a toothpick, then twirls the small, sharp shard of wood between his fingers. He’s listening to the vapid conversation from all around and looks about ready to stab it into someone.

How much does Elias have to hold him back? Is it a legitimate concern, or is Caelan all bark and no bite? It should worry me that I have no idea.

“Please don’t murder anyone,” I mutter, eyebrows furrowing. “I’m not cleaning up after you.”

Caelan laughs outright at that. “You sound so much like Elias, oh my God.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Well, I tolerate you both, and you’re still hot despite trying to tell me not to murder people, so you’ve got that going for you.”

He’s teasing, and I’m happy his mood has improved enough to do so. The fact that he drags me into his lap and smooches me helps with that impression

and does quite a lot to alleviate my own insecurity. It also leaves me rather flustered. We're in full public view, dammit. Caelan gives no shits, but I'm blushing by the time he lets me up.

The high lasts for a little while, but I still can't shake the nagging feeling in the back of my mind about something being off. It's nothing to do with would-be murders or the awkwardness of a social situation where I feel so out of place.

It's the dissonance. I'm starting to understand, seeing Caelan here. It's like what I noticed back in Santa Monica, how the human glammers seem to fit them less and less the more I know them. They don't belong here any more than I do. And the act is a burden to keep up.

What I see and what the rest of the world sees is so different. To everyone else here, the demons Elias and Caelan are nothing more than a work of fiction, a *gimmick*.

I can't deny I'm relieved when the lights dim. But the relief only lasts a few short, sweet moments.

The room goes from dim to dark, with a cold air pressure that makes me suck in my breath. The hairs on my arms stand on end.

And it's not just me. Like a constant buzz around us, the low murmurs shift into excitement. Awaiting the *show*.

The room creaks as though all the weight of the world is threatening to unravel it. I hear Elias speak before I see him, his voice low, cold, and distant. His presence. He's playing a part again, empty words recited for the approval of an LA music machine.

Cheers and applause echo in my head, murmurs about special effects, *laughter*.

It's a game to them.

It's not real.

My chest feels too tight. I can't breathe.

It's not real. Elias and Caelan aren't real. Not to them. Their entire

existence is a show, a game. Where does that leave me and all I've experienced with them?

My stomach is tied in a knot so tight it feels like I'm going to be sick, and my vision blurs as I stare down at my shaking hands.

"I can't do this," I choke. I don't even wait for Caelan to react. I need out.

A few pairs of eyes land on me as I turn and leave, but almost everyone is too distracted by what's happening on stage to care about me. Small mercies.

The light shifts. I can see it even in my peripheral vision, fracturing into shards of light and shadow, and the sounds around me reach a sickening pitch of white noise. Elias is there. On stage now, in person. No glamour, all his power is showing. I know it.

Bile rises in my throat.

My hands are shaking as I fumble the door open and slip outside, not checking or caring if Caelan is following me.

It's easier to breathe out here, but not by much. There are signs there. Across the grand main hallway and into a smaller side corridor, winding around a corner or two, there's a restroom. Fancy, like most things here. A combination of a bathroom and a separate powder room with mirrors, coat racks, and couches provides a nicer option than having to hide in a toilet stall.

I tuck myself into a corner and curl my knees to my chest, hands to my head, hiding my face so no one can see the tears.

Stupid.

It's so *stupid*.

Why am I even upset? Why does it hurt?

Everything feels so wrong.

"Hey, uhm. You okay, Shannon?" Caelan's voice cuts in, confused but concerned.

When I don't reply, I *can't*, Caelan touches my shoulder. I don't pull away but don't react to the touch, either. He sits down beside me.

It's obvious he doesn't know what to do. I sneak a glance through my

tears, and I can see the awkwardness written clearly on his face. But he's adamantly trying, and that hurts even more.

"What's up?"

I choke on a frustrated, bitter laugh.

Nothing. Everything. I don't know.

Why the fuck did that get to me so much? It wasn't even one thing. Just. Lots of stupid things that built up.

"Was it Elias doin' his creepy eldritch abomination thing?"

"What?" Caelan is so far off base that it manages to startle me out of it for a moment. "No! God, no. I'm not upset 'cause I'm scared of him."

Scared isn't right. It was like what I'd felt before—that *dissonance*—only escalated to something unbearable. Because that wasn't Elias, that was a caricature, a mask, just as much as their human glammers are. *That* was just a gimmick for a band.

It still feels unreal to me at times. It was especially bad after our first night together, when I'd wondered if I was fucking insane.

Wondered where the hell all my boundaries between fiction and reality went, the lines blurring into an indistinct mess.

How could they be *real*?

How could I look at beings like that and fall so hard for them?

I thought I was over that. All the conversations we'd had since, keeping in contact constantly, made it clear they were so much deeper than the parts they showed on screen—people, not just a little show for the sake of publicity.

Until tonight, and all of that came rushing back like a sucker punch to the gut.

Honestly, I wish I hadn't freaked out and had been able to stay and appreciate what Elias was doing, because I would have liked to have seen it. I can't deny his power is incredibly appealing, and when he uses that *voice*.

Even the whole breaking of reality thing aside, though, it stings. There

had been so much contention about him using his powers around me earlier, though he *had* been better about it and relaxed a lot more today. I know I should appreciate that, yet he just went full demon mode in front of an entire audience of strangers with no qualms?

Logically, I understand it. It makes total sense. They think everything is special effects. That it's Elias dressed up and acting in character, putting on a show for the sake of dramatics and excitement. Of course, it's not the same damn thing.

But logic doesn't stop that stupid, emotionally driven part of my heart that feels like Elias trusts them more than me.

One thorn of many.

It's so many things, so many stupid things that should be meaningless on their own. *How do I explain all of that?*

Even if I could find the words, I'm in no state to be speaking. If I try, I'll only break down even more, and I'm already embarrassing myself in front of Caelan. I am a fucking mess.

He doesn't know how to react, and I don't blame him. I've never been able to help anyone else in my life, either.

Caelan touches my shoulder again, and I shake him off.

"I don't know what to do," he admits. "Do you need tissues or something?"

It would almost be sweet—his attempts at helping despite how blatantly out of his depth he is. I'm more used to crying things out by myself. I hardly know what to do with someone here to comfort me. But tissues would be useful.

I nod slowly.

Caelan leaves briefly and returns with a small stack of paper towels. I take them gratefully, pulling the stupid mask off and letting it fall to the floor so I can wipe my eyes. At least I won't have to face him with tears trailing down my cheeks and a runny nose now.

Caelan tries again, placing his hand against my waist, and this time I accept the small gesture of comfort. I know I'm stiff at first, but he pulls me in closer to rest against his chest anyway. Slowly, gradually, I relax into the embrace.

I can't think about it too hard, though. God, that'll only make everything worse again. He's trying so hard for me. Why would he *try*? That's the other massive thorn in my side, jabbing at me like a knife wound. I don't deserve this. I don't deserve them. He's a goddamn *demon*, and I'm a pathetic bitch sobbing in a bathroom.

Another set of footsteps approaches. I tense and pray for whoever else needs the bathroom to go and leave, but they stop in front of us.

Elias murmurs my name, and my heart feels like it's breaking all over again.

When I don't respond, he turns to Caelan. "What happened?"

Caelan shrugs. "I didn't do anything."

I have to say *something*. I shake my head. "I-I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I'm... it's so stupid. I just got really insecure and jealous and shit a-and... maybe had a bit of a panic attack. I'm okay."

I can feel Elias' eyes on me. "You're not okay," he says, taking my hand.

I snatch it back with a choked sob. "Stop! Stop being so fucking *nice* to me."

"Why would we do that?"

"I don't know. How can I deserve this? Did you see that room? There were hundreds of people who would kill for a chance to be with you! Prettier, smarter, funnier. I'm *nothing*, okay? That's the problem. I *love* you, but I don't understand how you can see anything in me. I'm waiting for the day you wake up and realize I'm not worth it, and the more you act like you care about me in the meantime, the more it *hurts*."

They're both very quiet for a long moment. Elias takes my hand more firmly this time, not letting me pull away. "Shannon—" he begins, but I cut

him off.

“Oh, and that’s another thing. I love you. God. I’m in love with you. I can’t keep denying it to myself, and that *terrifies* me. I know, I know you’re not human, I get it, and I don’t expect you to be able to return my feelings the same way, I swear. I’d never put that pressure on you. But I just, I—”

I manage to keep it relatively together for long enough to get most of my rant out, but there are sobs catching in my throat again, and the tears only come faster. Trying to talk about it always makes it worse. I should’ve shut my damn mouth and waited until I’d cried it all out. *Idiot.*

But now I must finish. They’re both waiting for me.

“I don’t want to lose you,” I manage to get out, voice cracking.

“Why would you lose us?” Elias questions quietly.

“Isn’t it disgusting? Having a pathetic human head over heels for you?”

“You think so little of yourself,” he comments, and that cuts to the quick. A simple observation, but he’s so right, and it aches.

I have nothing to say in my defense. I don’t have the energy left. When Elias wraps his arms around me, I can only collapse against him, breaths ragged and my shoulders still quietly shaking.

“I’ll take you back upstairs,” he offers. “Our room is more private.”

I nod, appreciating the thought.

Elias lifts me in a bridal carry, and I allow my head to fall against his shoulder. Caelan picks up my discarded mask and follows us to the elevator.

I don’t want to leave Elias’ arms. I’ve tired myself out with the emotional outburst, and I’m much more ready to allow myself to be comforted now, as much as I can be. It still feels bittersweet, like it can only be temporary, but it’s nice to just be held.

“Do you want to change into something more comfortable?” Elias asks, setting me down on my feet as we enter the room.

I suppose that’s a good idea. It feels like more effort than it should be, but the ballgown is unwieldy and feels somehow fake now. Like I’m trying to

dress up and play pretend, be something I'm not.

I change into my pajamas, wiping off the rest of my makeup in the bathroom. It was wrecked anyway.

When I return, Caelan has lost his jacket and tie, his shirtsleeves rolled up, and top buttons are undone. A shame I'm not in the best frame of mind to appreciate the sight.

He and Elias are sitting on the room's couch, waiting for me. I hesitate, shy around them again for the first time, and there's something almost pained in Caelan's expression to see me pull back.

"Come here," Elias commands—low, sympathetic, but a command, nonetheless.

I'm not about to disobey a direct order.

I go to them, and Elias pulls me back into his arms, holding me. I breathe in a shuddering sigh. His hand settles above my hip, rubbing small, soothing circles against my skin.

"Now, dear. Do you want to talk to us?"

"No. I think I'm done. I'm really sorry. I'm normally better at bottling that shit up."

"There's no need to apologize," Elias reassures me.

"And bottling it up don't exactly sound too healthy," Caelan adds.

I level a wry, half-hearted glower at him. "And you've never bottled up *your* emotions?"

"That's different."

That gets a small, shaky giggle out of me. I lean against Elias again, and Caelan kisses the side of my neck.

"It still concerns me that you think you are worth so little to us."

The levity I'd managed to regain fades away again. I don't really want to talk about this. "I... I do believe you care. Or that you believe you care. But I don't see what I can offer you. I'm only with you because I got damn lucky running into you at the theater that first night. It could have been anyone."

Elias tilts his head. “You’re right. It was lucky we were there at the same time, but how many others were at the theater?”

“What do you mean?”

“You already demonstrated your devotion to us by seeking out such a place.”

I hadn’t thought about it that way before. “I suppose. But still, anyone could have gone.”

“Anyone could have. But you did.”

“And just ’cause any random person could’ve turned up there doesn’t mean we would’ve liked ’em just for that. Might’ve been a coincidence to run into you, but we wouldn’t have stuck around if there weren’t more to it.”

“You were singing,” Elias says, and I feel my face heating up at the reminder.

“Oh. Yeah. You heard that.”

“You bared your soul in that moment, although you didn’t know it. We could have easily left, or put our glammers into place, knowing you were there.”

I have considered that before. They always kept their true nature private. If they *had* known I was there... “Why didn’t you?”

“Remember what I said on the beach?” Elias prompts. “Regarding souls.”

“Yes. I guess.”

“Every soul has an energy, a frequency to it. Some are more harmonious. You may view it as when you meet someone and ‘click’ with them with very little effort. Your energy was... intriguing. Enough for us to want to see how you would react to the truth of what we are.”

Nodding, I think I understand what Elias is trying to say, but my chest still aches too much to want to accept it. “You...”

“You’re fun to be around,” Caelan adds. “Easy to get along with. Don’t annoy the shit out of me like a whole bunch of other humans do.”

“We resonate, don’t you think?” Elias concludes.

I look between them, feeling ready to start crying again. But only because I'm still emotional, still tender from before. They're closer to happy tears this time.

I laugh, trying to shake off the way it makes my heart flutter. "For a pair of demons, that's pretty sappy."

Elias raises an eyebrow. He hooks a finger beneath my jaw and lifts my chin, tilting my head up to face him. "Hmm... another thing, dear. You seem rather convinced we're somehow incapable of caring for you or that we would cast you aside for caring about us."

I try to glance away, my stomach sinking, but Elias won't let me. "I just thought, you're not exactly human, so it's not fair to expect you to *be* human."

"You think we're not capable of love? That is quite the assumption you're making."

His voice is low and even, not admonishing me, but guilt pangs through me just the same. I never thought about it from their point of view. How awful to assume they can't feel or love to the same extent just because of what they are. What the hell do I know about demons to be making judgments like that?

"I didn't mean..."

Elias must see the realization dawn in my eyes because he chuckles. "You were protecting yourself. If we can't love, you need not concern yourself whether we love you or not, is that correct?"

God. How can he do that? Just cut straight through my bullshit, take all my stupid concerns and insecurities that feel like an unmanageable, tangled mess in my head, and bring them down into something so succinct and terrifyingly accurate.

Elias has brought up the exact question I was trying to hide from this whole damn time, and I don't know if I can face it. Then again, it seems to be a night for falling apart, so if it goes badly, at least I have a head start on that.

“Do you?” I ask softly. “Love me?”

Immediately, I regret the words. Just saying them makes me want to run and avoid ever having to hear the answer, afraid of what it might be.

Everything was so much easier when this was just a stupid fling. *Why did I have to go and get attached?*

Elias hums in consideration. “I care for you. I feel very protective of you. And understand, I have no intention of letting you go.”

“You belong to us, Shannon,” Caelan says. His hand slides beneath my pajama top, over the small of my back, and I gasp as a small twinge of pain runs through the wound left there.

Last night, he carved his name into me, marking me as his.

It’s not love. They haven’t, and they won’t say that, but it doesn’t hurt as much as I was expecting it to. *I’m* the one moving way too fast and falling for them when I barely know them, and I didn’t expect their love, really. Maybe they could love me as time goes on and we grow closer. But as long as I don’t lose this, lose what I have with them now, I’m fine with it. That they care on any level is more than I could have dreamed of.

Belonging to them.

I can be happy with that.

“Now,” Elias says, brushing my hair from my face. “Are you ready to talk about what set all of this off?”

I shake my head, not as a no to his question but as a dismissive gesture. “I’m sorry,” I apologize again. “I’d been letting all that bullshit fester for too long, is all. It was the gala, all those other people there, so much more successful and with their lives together, I just... got even more insecure than usual. And then seeing you use your powers...”

Elias frowns. “Is that a concern for you?”

“No! It was the context of it. Because it wasn’t really you on stage, it was just a gimmick again, a front for Goëtica, and everyone else in that room believed that. It just fucked with my head a little.” I pause, wiping my eyes,

then sniff and continue with a sigh. “That, and... you were so reluctant about seeming inhuman in front of me earlier, but then you go and do that in front of a random audience? Like you trust them more than me.” I shake my head at myself. “It’s *dumb*. I do get it, I promise. It’s totally different things, the gala shit was just for show. Playing your part. But it just... set everything off, I guess. That’s all.”

“I see.”

“The demon thing doesn’t bother me at all, I swear. I really like seeing you use your powers. It’s kind of hot. And when you talk like *that*—” I cut myself off, blushing when I realize I’m going to gush if I’m not careful.

Fortunately, Elias doesn’t call me out on it. “Are you certain? Do not think I didn’t notice your distance after I created the mask for you earlier.”

“Oh. That. No, that was just more insecure bullshit. You’re so powerful and incredible, and it just hit me how out of my league you are. But, honestly, have you seen how gorgeous you guys are? I’d probably be thinking the same even without the demon magic shit.”

Elias huffs a small laugh. “You have strange priorities.”

“It’s part of being human. We’re all fucking messes.”

“You say that as though demons ain’t,” Caelan comments idly, a statement I don’t have time to unpack all the implications of.

“But I’m... your mess?” I say tentatively. Hopeful.

“Ours,” Elias reiterates firmly, then his lips are on mine, and I find myself melting into the heat of his kiss.

Chapter Fourteen

Moaning softly, I let Elias' tongue in. His hands slide beneath my top, caressing my sides, and I wrap my arms around his shoulders to hold him closer. Caelan is on my other side, one hand on my thigh and his mouth against my throat, alternating between soft kisses and letting his teeth graze against the sensitive flesh.

This, this is what I need now. I've spilled my soul, all my stupid anxieties, and I feel lighter without the burden of having it all bottled up. The physical comfort, the reassurance that they want me, is perfect.

Elias pulls away, and I whine.

"Look at me, dear." He's smirking, and a wicked glint is in his dark eyes. His voice lowers into that deep, commanding tone that makes my knees feel weak. "Do you trust me?"

I'm not sure why he's talking like that, but it makes my mouth feel dry.

I nod.

"And you will listen to me, won't you?"

"Y-yes. Of course, Sir."

Calling him Sir wasn't exactly planned, but when he talks like that, when there's that intensity about him, it feels so natural to bow to his will.

"Then listen." He grips my jaw again, tighter than before.

I can't look away even if I could turn my face. His gaze drags me in like a

black hole.

“You belong to us now. And we are not letting you go.” The possessiveness, the *dominance*, in his voice makes me shiver.

“Elias—”

“We would not give that honor to someone who was not worthy, do you understand?”

I swallow. I can feel my face heating up and my chest tightening again.

Even if it’s hard for me to wrap my head around them wanting me, Elias says they do, and there’s no arguing with him. Not when he says it like that.

When he speaks again, it’s slightly softer. “If you cannot believe in yourself, believe in me.”

I can’t find the words to reply. He’s told me everything I needed to hear, and my soul aches with how much that means to me, how much I appreciate it, and how much I want to give him the entire damn world in return.

Is it any wonder I ended up falling for him so hard?

I lean in and kiss him again, with all the passion I don’t know how to express out loud. Caelan chuckles behind me, apparently enjoying the sight, so I turn my head and kiss him too.

It gets a little hard to follow after that. All I know is that I’m sandwiched between them, and there are two pairs of hands all over me. I end up making out with each of them in turn, their kisses hard and heated.

I want them so badly. I want to give them everything.

My face is flushed, lips reddened and kiss-swollen, and it takes everything I have not to grind down needily against Elias’ thigh. It’s so easy for them to get me worked up and turned on, especially when my emotions are so raw, and all I need now is physical comfort. But I want to do something for Elias first.

I slide off the couch, getting to my knees in front of him.

“Shannon—”

“Please. Let me serve you,” I murmur, nuzzling my cheek against his

knee.

Lust flares in his eyes as he looks down at me. “If that’s what you want.”

He parts his thighs, and I settle between them, thrumming with anticipation. He’s hard beneath his suit trousers. That much is obvious from just a glance. I wasn’t the only one getting rather into our make-out session.

I can hear the quiet catch of his breath as I undo his fly and draw his cock out. It turns to a soft noise of appreciation as I graze my lips along the underside of his length, working my way up to the head with hot, open-mouthed kisses.

“Goddamn. You always look so fuckin’ good on your knees,” Caelan comments, his voice a rough drawl.

I don’t answer, too focused on slowly taking Elias’ cock into my mouth, curling my tongue around him, feeling the hot, heavy weight of his hardness. But I appreciate the compliment.

Elias tangles his fingers into my hair, guiding my movements—not too demanding, not yet. Just slow and steady, letting me take him deeper each time until his cock is hitting the back of my throat, and I groan softly as I breathe in through my nose and let him in. Let him gently fuck my face until there are tears in my eyes and saliva drools from my lips. The caress of his hands—one in my hair, the other cupping my face—is a delicious contrast to the way he rocks his hips and thrusts his cock into my mouth.

I tighten my lips around him, let my tongue stroke him, suck around his length—anything to please him.

It’s very much worth it to hear the sounds he makes—the way his breaths choke and the low groans. When I do something he likes, he *growls*, and they go straight to my core.

Caelan, not content to be left out, attacks Elias’ upper body. His wandering hands pull off Elias’ tie and shirt, leaving minor scratches in the wake of his clawed nails and a string of purpling love bites in the wake of his teeth and tongue.

Elias groans my name, and I only intensify my efforts. His head falls back, and he makes a guttural noise of pleasure, shoving me away. “Enough, dear.” He pants, and for a moment, I’m disappointed. I wanted to make him come. Then his eyes flash hungrily, and my stomach twists. “Allow me to return the favor.”

I make an undignified yelp, half gasp and half giggle, as he scoops me up and shoves me against the wall. He kisses me firmly to quiet me, then smirks.

Elias makes quick work of my pajamas, pulling my top over my head between kisses and dragging my shorts and underwear down together. He rids himself of the last of his clothing too. Once I’m naked against him, he hooks my knees over his shoulders and, with no preamble at all, lifts me off the floor.

“Elias! Oh, *shit*.”

Elias raises me to head height with my back pressed against the wall, legs wrapped around his neck, and his face buried between my thighs. I tangle one hand into his hair while the other scrambles against the wall, clutching at him as if I need to help hold myself up. I don’t. Elias keeps me steady, his grip on my thighs and his sheer strength more than enough to hold me up in the air while his tongue seeks out my dripping core.

I forget how to breathe for a moment. Forget how to think. He’s holding me up with no effort at all, and that casual display of power alone would have been hot as hell. But then there’s the fact he’s doing it to eat me out.

I arch my back against the wall, moaning. He’s barely even started, only delivering teasing licks against my entrance. He gradually delves deeper and, *shit*, I can’t writhe too much up here. I don’t think Elias would drop me, but there’s no sense in making the position even more difficult for him. Only it’s so hard not to squirm in pleasure as his tongue dips inside me and my brain turns to mush.

“Elias, oh God, *yes*,” I babble senselessly. I swear he smiles against me for a moment. Then he starts stroking me from inside in earnest, his tongue

doing the most deliciously sinful things, and my whole world narrows to nothing but heat and pleasure and *Elias*.

I adore the way he can leave me so utterly helpless, moaning for him, thighs trembling. When he curls his tongue against my clit, it sends a shock of desperate lust arching through my entire body.

My hand flies up to try and cover my mouth, but it barely muffles all the needy noises I'm making. It feels so good. *God, it feels good*. It's almost embarrassing how quickly he can drive me to the edge. Only I don't have any space left in my brain for emotions as needless as embarrassment. Not for this

"I-I..." I try to gasp out. "Elias, I'm gonna..."

"No, you're not, dear," Elias says, and I can only let out a desperate whine as he pulls away. He bites lightly at the inside of my thigh in admonishment. "We're only getting started."

He has me dazed and panting, and my knees shake enough to almost give way when Elias lowers me to stand on my feet again. He levels me with a heated smile that makes my heart skip, then gestures toward the bed. "I think you're forgetting someone."

Caelan.

Oh.

Caelan is sprawled on the bed, his shirt open and barely clinging to him, trousers gone, and boxers pushed down his thighs to free his cock. He has a hand wrapped around himself, but his eyes are fixed firmly on me.

"Why don't we put on a show for him?" Elias suggests, low and seductive, against the shell of my ear. I nod, speechless.

Elias guides me to the bed and positions me to kneel upright on the mattress while he holds me from behind. Caelan shuffles further back to make room, smirking like the proverbial cat that got the cream.

I can feel his heated gaze, devouring every inch of me while Elias plays with my body. He's touching me all over in feather-light caresses that feel

like they're going to drive me mad. One hand toys with my breasts, cupping each in turn and tugging at my nipples until I whimper, while the other migrates between my thighs.

"Dammit." Caelan groans lowly, thrusting his hips up into his own fist. "You don't know how good you look all sexed up for us."

The only answer I can give is a needy, broken gasp as Elias' fingers slide inside me. Two of them thrust into me while I squirm for him.

"Such a pretty little thing," Elias agrees. "And all ours."

"Y-yours!" I promise. My head lolls back against Elias' shoulder, eyes fluttering shut. I never even had time to calm down properly after how close I got before.

"You wouldn't come without permission, now, would you?" he murmurs darkly.

He says that, but he keeps stroking inside me, finding the exact spot that makes me cry out and teasing it relentlessly. Harder, faster. Another finger, three stretching me open now.

"Elias! Please," I beg. "I *can't*. If you keep doing that, I am gonna come."

My thighs are quivering, and desperate, needy whimpers fall from my parted lips. I'm writhing on his fingers, clenching involuntarily around him. I'm trying so hard, so damn hard not to come, but he won't *stop*, and it's too much. I'm not going to be able to hold back.

I don't want to disobey, I'd stop it if I could, but the physical stimulation is going to undo me.

"Please," I gasp again, choking on a broken sob as he curls his fingers at the perfect angle inside me.

I can't. I *can't*. All it takes is a few more strokes against that deliciously sensitive spot, his touch so rough but in the most blissful way, and I come undone.

Pleasure pulses through me, trembling around Elias' fingers as I shudder and cry, face flushed a brilliant red. All it takes is him finger fucking me for

me to end up a wreck.

Elias has stilled entirely, that dangerous sort of stillness of a predator waiting to pounce, and of course, I remember now how I wasn't supposed to orgasm without permission.

"D-dammit," I mutter shakily.

Slowly, Elias slides his fingers from me and drags his nails along the sensitive inside of my thighs, slick with my own wetness. "Now, Shannon, pet—"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to."

He chuckles darkly behind me, then kisses the side of my neck. I hesitantly turn to glance at him, slightly fearful of what I'll find. I hate to disappoint people, and no one more so than Elias, but there's only smug satisfaction on his face, and his eyes are wickedly intent. He's certainly not upset with me in any way.

The realization hits me immediately. "You did that on purpose," I accuse.

"Perhaps. But don't think I won't punish you, dear," he says, his voice a low, seductive rumble.

There's no 'perhaps' about it. Elias kept working me over until I came, even when I warned and begged him to stop, just so he'd have the excuse to punish me. I can't be upset about it, though, not when everything about his tone and body language promises that this will be the sort of punishment I will very much enjoy. He did it so both of us could benefit.

He grazes his teeth against the side of my throat. "Get back here and bend over the bed," Elias commands.

He guides me, dragging my hips back until I step down onto the floor, then he pushes my face and chest down into the covers, pinning me with a hand around my neck. His other hand trails over my ass, and I suddenly have a very good idea of what he has planned.

"Tied up and spanked, is that what you wanted?" he purrs.

God, yes.

And hearing him say it like that, in that deep, commanding voice, does things to me all on its own. I've barely come down from the high of my first orgasm, still sensitive and heady in the aftermath, but having him manhandle me and talk to me like that is enough to make lust spark through me all over again.

He pulls my arms behind me, forearms parallel across the small of my back, and picks up one of the discarded ties from where it had been tossed to the floor. I'm not sure if it's Elias' or Caelan's. It hardly matters. The slide of the silky fabric against my skin as he binds me tight with it is enough to make me moan softly.

I glance back over my shoulder to find Elias smirking heatedly. The expression is mirrored on Caelan's face in front of me.

The anticipation. The way they look at me like that. I can feel the heat pooling in my core again, just from knowing what's to come and *wanting* it. Elias' fingers graze over my ass again, down the back of my thigh, and that's all the warning I get before he pulls his hand back.

Thwack!

My hips buck with the force of the impact, and a moan falls from my lips. It stings, but not at all unbearably, and the pain excites me more than anything. Elias does it again, and my eyes roll back.

"Damn," Caelan groans adoringly. "Look at you, masochistic little slut. So fuckin' gorgeous."

He's getting off on watching me. Hard as hell, cock leaking in his fist as he strokes himself. Which is a mouth-watering sight. And with my head down on the bed, I have a perfect view of him.

"Mmm... Caelan—" I begin, only to be interrupted by my voice cracking as Elias lands another blow on my ass. The heat of it and the throbbing sting are the most blissful mix of pain and pleasure. It's hard to focus through it, my whole being craving to drown in the sensation. But I don't want to leave Caelan out. I try to gesture with my head for him to come closer, lips parted

in offering.

Elias catches on and chuckles. “Do you want to suck him too?”

Caelan’s eyes are glazed with desire as he looks down at me. “Not that I don’t appreciate the offer,” he says reluctantly. It’s clear he wants it with how rough his voice is. “But I dunno how much of a good idea it is to have teeth ’round there while you’re hitting her. I like a bit of pain, but that ain’t the good kind.”

That gets Elias to laugh outright for a short moment. “I’m sure she can figure something out, can’t you, sweetheart?”

I nod emphatically. Elias leans over to grip Caelan’s knees and drags him closer, close enough that my head ends up buried in his crotch.

Even with all my best intentions, Caelan makes a good point. So, I don’t take him into my mouth. Instead, I nuzzle against his hard length, teasing him with kisses and little kitten licks. It’s easier like this, anyway. I can’t brace myself with my arms bound behind my back, so blowing him properly might have been more challenging.

Elias gives me a moment to get settled, then I jerk and gasp as he returns to spanking me. That’s six. Seven. Eight. I stop trying to count the blows eventually. There’s too much to feel, and it overwhelms my senses.

There’s the sharp, biting sting when Elias’ hand cracks against me, bleeding out into a dull ache. Then there’s the soothing caress of his fingers between strikes. The heady musk of Caelan’s cock is right in my face. It feels hot and hard beneath my tongue as I lick along the underside and down to his balls, curling my tongue around one of them and lightly sucking on it until he moans.

“Oh, fuck yeah, babe. That’s a good girl,” he says, his voice glitching ever so slightly. The praise makes me glow.

Elias interrupts with another hard smack, harder than his previous ones, and it makes me cry out, squirming beneath his hand. “You’re distracting her.”

“You’re punishing her for no good reason,” Caelan shoots back.

I can practically hear the smirk in Elias’ voice. “Do you really think this is a punishment?” he asks before raining down a series of short, hard blows to my thighs and ass.

“E-Elias!” I gasp, moaning. It’s not a moan of pain. My face feels so damn warm, my head swimming blissfully, and the ache between my legs is increasing as the dull, throbbing sting of his strikes builds.

“You love it, darling.”

“Yes.” I breathe. God, yes. I’ve admitted it before, and my time with Caelan and Elias is only confirming what I already knew—I do have a bit of a masochistic streak. Being sandwiched between them like this, bent over with my face buried between Caelan’s thighs and Elias behind me, I want nothing more than to stay in exactly this position but with both of their cocks inside me.

“Elias, I...” My face is flushing even brighter. I know it. “I want you. Both of you... like this. Please.”

There’s a short moment in which they translate what I’m asking, then Caelan’s cock twitches. It bucks beneath my lips, telling me he’s *very* into the idea. “You wanna be spit-roasted, doll?”

“Greedy,” Elias accuses lightly, giving me one last spank for such a bold request and making me arch and hiss again. Then his fingers trail back between my thighs and brush against my slick entrance. “And so wet again already.”

I whimper. “I need you, Sir.”

“How precious.” He leans over and presses a kiss between my shoulder blades. “You want to take both our cocks at once?”

The only reply I can manage is a nod and a needy whine.

“Hmm. I did have another plan in mind, but I’m certain such a lovely, willing little pet won’t have a problem with doing both.”

That has me curious. *Elias had something particular in mind?* I almost

want to forget about the spit-roasting idea and concede to whatever he had planned, but both?

Both is good.

Both might be more than I can handle, my mind supplying me with mental images of being fucked and used over and over and over again until I'm a wreck. That only makes the idea hotter.

I'm more than willing to let them ruin me. They've been very good at putting me back together again afterward so far, after all.

Elias squeezes my thigh gently, a short warning to let me know he's going to leave for a moment. Not to go far, only over to the bedside table to retrieve condoms. And lube, apparently. The latter he tosses at Caelan, alongside another condom, and Caelan picks it up from the covers and raises an eyebrow at Elias.

“How about this? You fuck her while I fuck you.”

Caelan's other eyebrow joins the first, a grin spreading over his face. “At the same time?”

Elias nods, and Caelan lets out a low whistle.

“After we're done spit-roasting her, of course. You can prep yourself while she sucks you if you like. Or not. Your choice.”

Caelan barks a laugh. “How many goddamn times have I taken your dick? Just lube up enough when we get to it and I'm good.”

My brain is still somewhere back on that part about having Caelan fuck me while Elias fucks him, and my breath catches in my throat.

Oh, God.

Yes.

Please.

If that was what Elias meant by having another plan in mind, both are *definitely* good.

I don't have time to think about that, though. Elias returns, and his hands are immediately on my sides, lips trailing hot kisses down my spine and

making me shiver. I spread my legs wider, almost subconsciously, hips grinding against the edge of the bed. I'm so ready for him, feeling it like a physical ache between my legs with how empty and needy I am.

"Please, Elias," I murmur.

"Would you rather have your arms unbound for this?"

I shake my head. It would be easier, no doubt about that, but there's something particularly hot about being tied up, so helpless and trapped between them while being used from both ends.

Caelan kicks his boxers off the rest of the way and lets the open shirt slide from his shoulders. Then, naked in front of me, he grips my chin and forces me to look up at him. "Hey, Shannon. You want my cock, doll?"

"Mmm," I hum in agreement, already leaning in to nuzzle against his erection again. I don't care if I'm acting desperate and shameless. I want them. I love them. I'd do anything for them. I want to please them. That, and the thought of being used by them, has me dripping with lust.

Elias grips my hips, more firmly this time, and there's clear intent in his touch. He holds me steady while the sheathed head of his cock grinds against my entrance, slowly sinking into me and *fuck*. I moan as his thick length stretches me open, and it hits me all over again just how desperate I was for it.

I'm so full. Elias doesn't stop until he's buried completely inside me, and I don't think I'll ever get over how deliciously huge he is.

And maybe Elias is right. Maybe I *am* greedy, that even this isn't enough. Not when I've been promised more, not when Caelan is right there in front of me, waiting expectantly.

I run my tongue along Caelan's cock, kissing the tip. He's leaking pre-cum liberally, and I can taste it as I tighten my lips around him. His clawed fingers run through my hair encouragingly, holding the sides of my head to brace me as he thrusts shallowly into my mouth.

My fingers flex and clench into fists, bound behind my back. My eyes

flutter shut, and I moan quietly around Caelan's cock.

Moving slowly at first so as not to overwhelm me, they find a steady rhythm to settle into and start getting into it. And I'm gone.

It's not *hard* hard. They're still mindful that the position is somewhat of a strain, but it's hard enough, rough enough. Two pairs of hands gripping possessively at me while their cocks fill me and fuck me from both ends, and it feels filthy. I can't do anything like this other than let them have their way with me. Let them use me. Surrender to the pleasure as Elias' cock strokes inside me, and Caelan's cock fills my mouth until I can barely breathe, but that doesn't matter because it's just *good*.

I'm theirs. It makes me feel claimed, *wanted*.

They're not holding back their noises. Elias' sharp breaths, the quiet, possessive growls, the way he mutters my name so deeply I can barely hear it. Caelan's groans and half-choked murmurs of encouragement and praise, of how well I take their cocks, how hot my mouth is, how much he wants to come down my throat.

Elias catches that last part. "No," he demands.

"C'mon! I've barely had any action yet, lemme—"

"You can come when it's your turn inside her."

That's hard to argue with. I almost want to laugh at Caelan's frustrated hiss, but then Elias thrusts into me again, and his cock strokes against the most blissful spot, and I end up moaning instead.

If it weren't for Caelan's cock muffling my noises, I'd be the loudest of all with needy little whines, mewling with pleasure each time I'm filled and fucked. It's far from the hardest they've taken me, but both at once is so much more intense.

My legs are shaking, and I'm glad to be bent over the edge of the bed so I don't have to support my weight. I don't think I could. My arms are straining against the tie binding them, face flushed, saliva drooling from the corner of my mouth where it's stretched so wide around Caelan's length, and my own

slick trailing down my thighs.

It's utterly perfect.

Elias comes first. His grip on my hips tightens, hard enough to mix pain in with pleasure. His thrusts grow shallow, staying buried deep as his cock bucks inside my tight, wet heat.

"Ah, Shannon," he groans out, his voice rough and hoarse. "You're so good, pet."

Elias slowly slides his cock free once he's spent, and I let Caelan slide from my mouth in turn. Elias guides me up to sit in Caelan's lap.

"Hi," I greet, grinning shyly as if I hadn't been sucking on his cock while Elias pounded me from behind.

Caelan has no time for teasing, only growling and immediately dragging me into a demanding kiss.

"I can taste my cock on you," he comments in a voice that makes my stomach flip and my core pulse.

Elias undoes the tie from around my wrists. The second I'm free to do so, I fling my arms around Caelan's neck and rock against him. His cock is right *there*, grinding against my soaked hole.

"Tell me you're good to keep going," Caelan says, almost begging.

"Yes! Please, I want it."

He grunts and shoves me away, creating enough space for him to roll on the condom Elias had tossed at him earlier. The second he's done, he drags me back, too worked up and impatient to give me any warning. Not like I don't know what's coming, but being so roughly filled again makes me cry out.

"Ah, Caelan!" I gasp, clenching and trembling around him. I'm already in such a heady state of pleasure from being spanked, then used by both of them, suspended in a state of almost-but-not-quite-enough to push me over the edge, that I'm close to coming from the penetration alone.

He can tell. Caelan grins, gaze searing with lust. His nails claw down my

back, scraping over the wound of his name carved into me, making me flinch and squirm.

“Oh, fuck, Shan,” he groans out, littering my mouth with fierce kisses. “You’re so good, so tight and wet for me.”

I can only moan helplessly in response. His pace is far more brutal now, chasing his orgasm and driving me rapidly toward my own. When he decides I’m not riding him hard enough, he grips my hips and lifts me, flipping me onto my back in one smooth movement.

I’m part gasping, part giggling, loving the exhilaration of being manhandled like that. Then Caelan’s lips are on mine again, more insistent than ever.

Some small, distracted part of me is vaguely aware that Elias is still there, standing at Caelan’s side and watching us intently. But it’s hard to focus on something as minor as that while Caelan’s all over me, and my entire existence feels like it’s narrowed down to his touch and the white-hot pleasure of his cock pounding into me.

Caelan slows, and I can’t hold back my whine of disappointment until I remember.

That’s right. Elias wanted to fuck Caelan while Caelan was fucking me, and the thought sends a shudder of desire flooding through my veins. Elias is stroking himself back to hardness with one hand, watching while Caelan has his way with me, a fresh condom packet at the ready in the other.

Elias moves behind Caelan, and I lose track of what he’s doing. I’m very thoroughly pinned to the bed without much wriggle room to see what’s happening, but from the way Caelan has stilled and his expression gone slack, I can take a pretty good guess.

“Last chance for prep,” Elias offers.

Caelan snorts. “Treat me gently and I’ll fuck *your* ass next,” he retorts. Under other circumstances, with anyone else, it might have worried me, but Caelan’s a demon and seems to have a masochistic streak as wide as mine.

He can handle it.

Elias leans over as he lubes himself up, muttering something obscene that makes Caelan's eyes flare. Then Caelan hisses and shudders as Elias' cock sinks into him.

There's a moment where he takes things slow, a moment that's almost tender. Caelan stays still, buried to the hilt inside me, while Elias shallowly thrusts into him, stretching him open.

"Fuck," Caelan swears quietly but emphatically, and I laugh because, yeah, being in the middle is kind of like that.

I cup his face and kiss him, vaguely aware of Elias' movements behind him. I'm *very* aware when Elias snaps his hips forward and fucks Caelan hard, because the force of the movement slams Caelan even deeper into me.

Oh, *God*.

They've done this before. A lot. It's obvious that Elias knows exactly how Caelan likes it and the angle to make him writhe. I can see it in Caelan's blissed-out expression, the way his eyebrows furrow and eyes glaze over, and he grits his teeth to stop himself from moaning. The pleasure is mixed with pain because Elias isn't at all gentle with him, not now that the initial moment of adjustment is over. The sight is so hot. But it's impossible to take the time to truly appreciate it because once Elias has established his rhythm, Caelan starts moving with him. Then *I'm* the one getting fucked out of my mind again.

I'm not going to last. And neither is Caelan.

I arch up against him, knees bent and tight to his sides. I'd lock my legs around him if I could, but then that would get in Elias' way. I wrap my arms around Caelan's shoulders instead, head tossed back and throat bared to Caelan's biting kisses.

Elias can't kiss me in this position, but he takes one of my hands and grazes his lips against my knuckles instead, smiling at me, and it's such a sweet and out-of-place gesture in the middle of a hardcore threesome that it

leaves me more flustered than anything else he could have possibly done.

It's enough of a distraction that Caelan's next thrust catches me off guard. I cry out, eyes rolling back.

There's no escape from the pleasure—so good, but at the same time almost overwhelming, dragging me under. And if I think it's enough to drive me out of my mind, Caelan has it even worse. Thrusting forward, his cock is surrounded by my heat, but he impales himself even deeper on Elias' hard length every time he pulls back.

His expression says he's loving it and hating it at the same time, his voice cracking as he moans and mutters desperate, filthy curses, barely holding it together.

His rhythm grows erratic, his grip on me tightening as his head lolls forward, and he breaks. He bites down on my shoulder hard enough to leave a mark, and the sudden shock of pain is enough to push me over the edge.

“Caelan!” I scream, arching against him.

It's already more intense than my first orgasm, and pleasure wracks through me, leaving me trembling and lightheaded. Panting and moaning, I cling to Caelan as my hips buck, and I clench around him, milking his cock.

I don't get any time to recover. Elias has a look in his eyes that's hungry. Possessive. More feral than anything I've seen from him so far. Like he's been trying to hold back this whole time, and his control is finally slipping.

He shoves Caelan aside and grips my thigh. “Stay,” Elias commands roughly as if I have the mental capacity left to even think about moving. He's only gone for a second, swapping the condom he was using on Caelan for a clean one, then he's back on me. His touch is immediately demanding, spreading my legs and shoving them back until I squeak, almost bent in half.

Elias pins my wrists on either side of my head and shoves into me, and I moan in delight. I love anything they do to me, but there's a particular thrill when it's *rough* like this.

He pauses, breathing heavily. He's staring down at me with that dark look

in his eyes, teeth grit. “Tell me...” he says, “... if it’s too much.”

“It’s not. I love it. Please, Elias.”

“I want to claim you. I want to *own* you. I want you. To. Be. Mine.”

It’s almost a growl at the end. His words send a shiver through me, and I whimper needily.

He steadies himself, taking a long, deep breath. “I’ve already told you I can be... possessive. The more I care for you, the more I never want to let you go. It gets harder and harder to hold back.”

I can feel something tightening in my chest. It thrills me to the core to hear him talk like that, to know he *wants* me.

“Then don’t,” I breathe.

Caelan gives a quiet laugh from where he’s sprawled on the other side of the bed, happy to collapse in an exhausted, satisfied heap. “Careful what you wish for. You think I’m bad with a knife? You haven’t seen Elias when he gets in a *mood*.”

“What do you—” I don’t get a chance to finish the question because Elias’ lips are on mine, and my words are cut off into a moan. The kiss is immediately claiming, dominating.

I melt against him, part my lips, and let him ravage my mouth. I submit to him completely as he fucks me.

And it’s not merely that it’s hard or rough. There’s an intensity—his *control* over me—about the way I can’t resist him at all. There’s something about how the room feels like it’s spinning around me like it’s warping at the edges and darkening.

That’s not my imagination. There’s a shift, subtle but undeniable. Elias has gone from being powerful but mostly human to being a genuine demon.

Damn.

“You belong to me,” Elias says, and his voice reverberates with all the weight of this power behind it. The shadows around him, usually so subtle, flare out violently against the growing darkness. And it’s terrifying but

incredible at the same time.

“Yes!”

“Every inch.” He groans, thrusting into me over and over and over. “Every inch of your body is *mine*.”

My voice cracks. “I’m y-yours.”

“No one else can ever bring you the pleasure I can.”

If Caelan has anything to say about that, his words are lost beneath the dizzying ringing in my ears.

I’ve never felt more helpless in my life. Or more turned on. All I can do is surrender to him, completely and utterly, and there’s nothing I want more.

Submit to him. That’s what he wanted, wasn’t it? My absolute submission.

God. He can have it.

“*Master*,” I moan out brokenly.

He leans down until his lips graze the shell of my ear. “Good girl,” he murmurs. “You’re mine. And I’m going to fuck you until your cunt takes the shape of my cock.”

He spews his filth with such a silver tongue that I can only whine in response.

“You have no *idea* how much I want to fill you up and corrupt you from the inside.”

“Do it,” I beg. Apparently, that’s enough to get Elias to slow for a moment, some of his intensity lessening. The intensity of the way he’s fucking me, anyway. The look in his eyes as he stares down at me makes my stomach flip.

“You... you can. If you want. It’s safe.” It’s incredibly hard to think. Elias is still inside me, but he’s stopped, buried deep, while we try to have half a discussion in the middle of all of this. His cock still grinds against my inner walls as I involuntarily tremble and clench around him, so needy and impossibly aroused, and it’s—

Shit. What was I even trying to say?

“You and Caelan, you can’t carry diseases, right? So, it’s only not getting me knocked up that’s the potential issue. And believe me, that is *not* something I want in my life right now. If there were any risk, I wouldn’t be taking it.”

“But there isn’t?” he prompts.

I shake my head. Something in me feels like it’s shattering at the thought alone—to be so filthily claimed like that. “Come inside me! Please.”

Pure lust flares in his eyes as he pulls out, removing the condom. I’m too shaky to hold my original position, bent nearly in half, without Elias to support me there. I collapse down to the bed with a moan.

Elias allows it. He shifts me onto my side, kissing me firmly again as he hooks one of my legs over his shoulder and sinks back into me.

The new position is a little less strained, and Elias’ cock pounds into me at a new angle, making my eyes roll again. It also has the benefit of letting me turn my face into the covers to muffle my screams. There are a lot of those.

Elias strokes his knuckles along my jaw. Then his hand lowers to my throat, and I gasp. His grip isn’t enough to choke me, but it’s possessive and dangerous enough to send a helpless thrill through me.

Having him pin me down and wrap his hand around my neck while he fucks me raw, the weight of his sheer *power* electrifies the air. Loving him. Submitting to him. He’s so possessive and demanding, and it’s everything I could have ever dreamed of in all my fantasies about fucking the darkest sides of them.

All I can do is beg for him, “Elias, Master, *please.*” The searing heat of another orgasm builds rapidly. My muscles tense and tremble, fingers clutching at the sheets, my body slick with sweat.

Elias growls my name, abruptly stilling. He tenses and groans, eyes clenching shut, and his cock twitches inside me. Heat floods my face,

knowing he's spilling into me, filling me up with his seed, and it's filthy. Hot. So used, so claimed, and that's enough to break me.

I come, and it's intense to the point of being overwhelming. So good, but too much at the same time. I can't even breathe, drowning in Elias' presence, wracked with so much sensation.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I mumble, my voice wrecked and slurred.

Clinging desperately to him, I need him to ground me, but even that's not enough. I give in to the white noise saturating my brain and surrender to the bliss of orgasm.

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Chapter Fifteen

Gradually, I regain enough of my mind to focus. When I do, I realize I'm being held between them. Trembling in their arms, utterly spent and boneless, a fucked-out mess.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Caelan asks. He's stroking soothing circles against my hip while Elias holds one of my hands and rubs his thumb over my knuckles.

"Mmm," I agree.

Caelan snorts lightly. "Is that a yes or a no?"

Elias brushes a strand of my sweat-soaked hair from where it's sticking to my face. "I apologize, darling. I tried to warn you we could be... rough when our control slips."

I giggle exhaustedly. He sounds honestly concerned, almost a touch remorseful, and it's sweet. If unnecessary.

"I knew what I was getting into," I remind him. "And that was amazing."

"You don't mind that—"

"I loved it, Master."

The worry in his expression fades out, replaced by a flash of smug satisfaction at having me refer to him by that title.

As much as I enjoyed myself, there's no denying he pushed my limits. I'm still shaking and don't think I'll be able to move for a good while yet.

I'm going to be so sore tomorrow.

Closing my eyes, I let my head rest limply against Elias' shoulder, groaning. He's murmuring to me, vague reassurances, but my head is spinning too much to focus on something as mundane as words. The tone of his voice is enough, as is the comfort of his arm draped over my waist.

Elias gives up talking directly to me after it becomes obvious I'm in no state to reply. Instead, I hear him talking quietly to Caelan over the top of me, playfully snarking at each other and occasionally taking turns to check in on me with a soft kiss or squeeze of my thigh.

"I want to claim you," Elias says eventually. That's the first thing that stands out as being worth paying attention to through my daze.

I turn my face to bury against his chest, huffing a short, breathless laugh. "Think you already covered that."

"Yeah, no kidding," Caelan comments. At first, I assumed he meant the same as I did, that Elias well and truly fucked me. But then I realize he's gesturing to something else. My wrist, for example, and a particular spot on my hip.

I raise my arm slightly to look at it, blinking dumbly. My mind still isn't working enough to process what I see.

There are marks there, like bruises in the distinctive shape of handprints—Elias' fingers around my wrists where he was pinning me down and where he had been gripping my hips at certain points. But they're too dark for bruises, almost pure black, and embedded beneath the surface of my skin like a tattoo. His darkness seeped into my veins, and my eyes widen.

"Oh," I say.

My stomach churns. It *is* hot. I love being covered in their markings, in bruises and scratches and knife wounds, but this is something different. Something I don't entirely understand. What even left a mark like *that*? Elias' power? The shadow-like black magic that surrounds him when he lets go. What happens if it's *in me*?

“Those will fade,” Elias is quick to reassure me. “It won’t harm you. It is simply... a remnant. Nothing more severe than as if it were a bruise.”

“How...” I start, then have to swallow before I can continue the question. “How long will it last?”

“No more than an hour or two.”

“Okay.” I drag my eyes away from the markings, a little unsettled. I look up at Elias instead and focus on him. He’s been so protective of me so far. He wouldn’t do anything to harm me. I trust him. “You said you wanted to... claim me?”

Elias nods and kisses my forehead. “Caelan has left a permanent mark on you already.”

My breath catches. “And you want to as well.”

He smiles. “How would you like a collar, Shannon?” Elias purrs. He trails his fingers over my throat, and I shiver.

“I’ve noticed you tend to favor choker-style necklaces,” he continues. “I could create a collar for you in a similar style, the same way I created your mask. One that would bind you to me while being subtle enough not to arouse suspicion in your everyday life. Unlike Caelan, I do have some concept of discretion.”

“Hey,” Caelan says. “It’s not like the scar will even be visible where it is. A collar will.”

“A collar doesn’t involve carving my name into her flesh.”

I laugh. “It’s fine. You’re both right. And I... like the sound of a collar.”

Like it is an understatement. The idea thrills me, a symbol of ownership.

Of how I belong to Elias.

That he wants to keep me.

Elias sits against the headboard and scoops me into his lap, letting me lean against him. I start to shiver slightly, the sweat drying on my skin cooling me now the exertion is over, and he pulls the covers up to wrap around my shoulders.

He's so tender about it now, miles away from the way he was claiming my body. Almost. It's tender, gentle touches as he grazes his fingers over my collarbones, around my neck, tilting my head back. But there's still that look in his eyes, the one that says he *owns* me.

"Do you want this, darling?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

"You won't be able to take the collar off. Only I would be able to do that for you."

I shoot him a smile, then lightly kiss his lips. "I don't want it off. I want to know I belong to you, always."

"You really are such a sweet little thing, aren't you?"

The question is rhetorical. I don't answer, only sigh and obligingly lift my chin to bare my throat for him. Elias kisses me there, and then I feel the soft, cold static of the darkness he commands as it wraps around my neck. The sensation fades as it solidifies, and I lift my fingers to touch the thin band that remains.

It has the cool smoothness of metal, but the flexibility of leather and fits comfortably snug against my skin. There's no clasp to it—no beginning and no end.

He holds me close once it's done, stroking over where the collar meets my throat—admiring his work, admiring me. "There. Now you have something to remember both of us by."

I laugh lightly at that. "How could I ever forget? There's not a day that goes by that I don't think of you."

Caelan's grinning at us. "You're adorable. And the collar looks good on you. Guess I can admit that much."

"As good as your name sliced into my skin?"

"Well, you know I'm biased for kinky knife shit." He rolls over onto his stomach, regarding me with those amused, luridly yellow eyes. "This is cute and all, but I got just one question. How come he gets to fill you up with

spunk, and I don't?"

I sputter, the question taking me off guard. As well as being somewhat embarrassing, now I'm not caught in the heat of the moment.

"Caelan, don't be crude," Elias says.

Caelan snorts. "Like you can talk! I was right here the whole time. I *heard* that shit you were saying to her."

"Um... because Elias asked, I guess?" I suggest, answering Caelan's actual question. "You could too... if you wanted." I can feel my face heating up at the offer I'm making.

Caelan's eyes light up, his grin widening.

Elias immediately cuts in. "Not now. She's already had enough for one night."

"Why don't you ask her that?"

"No, Caelan." Elias' tone is commanding.

But Caelan isn't deterred. "Don't be an overprotective ass!"

"Don't think with your dick all the time."

"Again. Pot fuckin' kettle," Caelan remarks.

I giggle. "I feel a lot better," I say.

"See?"

Elias growls, but it's not exactly angry. More predatory. "If you really want to get laid again that badly, I'm sure we could arrange something."

Caelan barks a laugh. "I can fuck wit' you any time. I wanna make the most of our time with—"

The remainder of the sentence is cut off as Elias lunges for him and knocks Caelan onto his back, pinning him to the bed. Caelan's not having any of it. His eyes narrow, even as his smile widens into something feral and elated, and he pushes back until he has his legs wrapped around Elias and flips their positions.

Oh. Okay. That's how it's gonna be. I bite my lip, burying my chin in the covers to hide my grin of delight.

Watching them is always so fascinating. Hypnotizing. The power and grace, the way they can casually lift and throw each other. It's more restricted this time—they don't exactly have a whole ballroom for play-fighting, only wrestling on the bed with its very limited space. I shift out of the way with a squeak of alarm or risk getting pinned myself.

But it's *fun*. Sometimes they'll pause to kiss, or their touches involve far more groping than strictly necessary. They're snarky and antagonistic, and they make it work.

Elias gets Caelan pinned firmly on his stomach, having to use almost his full body weight to keep him there. I fumble but pass Elias a condom when he gestures for one and the lube from where it had been tossed aside amongst the sheets.

He shoves into Caelan just like that, and Caelan hisses.

I find myself squirming, but I can't look away. I didn't exactly get the chance to appreciate it before, but the powerful snap of Elias' hips, the tightness of his grip, the expression of utter satisfaction... *God, he's hot.*

Of course, Caelan's not one to lie back and take it, even if he's enjoying himself too. Bucking his hips back against Elias and making Elias groan by, I can only assume from his muttered curses, clenching down tight around him. He wriggles free and flips them, pinning Elias onto his back with his knees holding Elias' hips down.

Caelan makes a sound somewhere between a glitchy cackle of triumph and a moan as he sinks back down and starts to ride Elias hard.

Elias attempts to shove him off again, and Caelan grunts. "Shannon, get over here."

"Huh?" I ask dumbly, much too caught up in the show to understand why.

Caelan's grin is fucked-out and feral. He grabs Elias' shoulders and pushes him back into the bed to stop Elias from trying to regain control, growling. "Sit on his face. That'll keep him down."

"Caelan!"

“C’mon. I’m serious.”

They’ve already thoroughly worked me over, and even if I’ve had enough time to recover somewhat, I’ll only end up even more exhausted and sore tomorrow if I let them rope me into anything else.

That’s what the sensible part of my mind tells me. The part that’s getting turned on again from watching them and shivering with lust at the thought very much wants in.

I let the covers drop from my shoulders and crawl over. Caelan beams at me while Elias raises an eyebrow.

“You don’t, um... mind?”

“Do it,” Caelan encourages, utterly delighted. “After the way he was fucking you before, a li’l turnabout’s only fair.”

Elias shoots a glare at Caelan. “I am happy to pleasure you, darling, but not because of this brat and his insolent intentions.”

“Insolent, my *ass*,” Caelan whoops, then groans as Elias thrusts up particularly hard into him in retribution.

I giggle, then yelp as Elias grips my thighs and pulls me over to straddle his face. For a moment, I feel self-conscious about the position. Then Elias’ tongue hungrily finds my core, and I forget everything else.

“Elias... oh, God.” I moan shakily. He must be able to taste himself on me, and the thought is as arousing as it is filthy.

I ride Elias’ face while Caelan rides his cock, losing myself in the pleasure. Caelan wraps an arm around my waist and leans me back, turning my head so we can thoroughly make out at the same time.

Caelan doesn’t stop until Elias comes. And as soon as he’s finished with Elias, Caelan lays me down on the bed and has his turn with me.

For all his flippancy and seeming carelessness, he’s mindful of not pushing too hard. He takes it slow. The smooth, steady slide of his cock inside me is enough to have me breathless and moaning for him, even without his usual roughness.

He gets his turn to come inside me too.

But Elias is possessive and hard again. Goddamn demon stamina, they're going to be the death of me one day.

In the best way.

He can't let Caelan have the last say. Caelan had me all to himself last night, and now it's Elias' turn. He pulls me into his lap, my back against his chest.

I'm too exhausted to ride him, but it still feels good to lay limply against him, moaning prettily as he gently uses me, his lips littering tender kisses all over me as he manipulates my body like a rag doll.

It makes me feel so deliciously floaty, and maybe a little dissociated. It's all right because it's only in the headiest and most pleasurable way imaginable, without the almost overwhelming intensity of before, which I'm thankful for this time around.

Elias forces another orgasm out of me by the time he's done, and I end up a breathless, trembling wreck slumped against him. He pulls out, and I can feel the warm gush of his seed leaking out of me. Maybe Caelan's too. That's three times they've come in me. I'm so full of them, so filthy. So theirs, their little toy to use and pump full of their cum.

The thought makes me squirm.

But once it's over, they're so sweet again, if not a little amused at how damn out of it I am. Elias chuckles as he lifts me. There is no way I'm walking, so he carries me to the bathroom. As much as I'd be happy to pass out in their arms, Elias is right when he says we all need to clean up first.

He draws me a bath this time since standing isn't going to happen, and I spend most of it nuzzled against Elias' chest. He talks to me, praising me for being so good for them and keeps checking if I'm okay. I can only reply in vague murmurs and the occasional yawn. Fucked out and exhausted, the deepest satisfaction leaves my whole body feeling utterly boneless. I'm warm and comfortable, and will pass out in his arms soon.

Once he deems us clean enough, Elias wraps me in a towel and dries me off. Caelan has my pajamas ready when I get back to the bedroom.

“Seriously, doll, you okay? You’re still kind of out of it,” he asks as he helps me pull them on, already in a pair of sleep pants himself.

“I’m dead,” I mumble. “I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

Caelan snorts. “God, you’re adorable.”

“I don’t think anywhere with us could be considered heaven,” Elias comments dryly. “We’re rather the opposite of angels.”

“Then, if this is Hell, I never want to leave.”

Elias kisses me, admirably holding back a laugh. “You’re sweet, but you should rest now.”

“Do you need anything? Water, something to eat?”

I might need some painkillers for tomorrow, but my brain still feels too sluggish to ask for that. I shake my head. Elias fetches me a glass of water anyway, for later, even if I don’t feel like drinking now.

“I apologize, dear,” Elias says again. “Perhaps we shouldn’t have played so hard.”

“I’m not that breakable,” I insist. “I can handle it. Just tired out now.”

“Clearly,” is Elias’ wry response.

I bury my face into the crook of his neck as he lays me down and joins me in bed. “I feel like you’re mocking me.”

“I would never.”

Caelan laughs, curling up behind me from the other side of the bed and pressing kisses against the back of my neck. “It’s just that we don’t see you that often. So, when we do, we can get... a little overzealous.”

I huff a laugh. “I noticed.” Not that I mind, really. “So, the solution here is obviously you need to see me and fuck me on a more regular basis, so it doesn’t get all pent up.”

“Hah. I like the way you think, doll.”

Caelan’s just joking around, teasing as always, but Elias seems to grow

oddly serious about it. “Would you want to see us more often?”

“God, *yes.*”

“Would the appeal and the novelty not wear off?”

“Wha...” For the first time, I regret being too blissed out and exhausted to think because this seems important. *Why would Elias even ask a thing like that?* “I’m yours. Of course, I want to be with you.”

“We’d interfere with your life.”

“You make my life *better.*”

Elias hesitates, seeming to weigh what he wants to say next. He cards his fingers through my hair, lightly massaging my scalp. “I think... you may make our lives better too.”

I don’t have any reply to that, but it makes me feel like glowing. My fingers drift to the collar around my throat, and I tilt my head up to kiss Elias. “I’m yours,” I murmur again.

Caelan coughs behind me.

“Yours, plural. I meant you too.”

“Damn right,” he says, making a pointed gesture of brushing his fingers over the small of my back, over the knife marks still left there, causing me to shiver a little.

I’m too exhausted to continue the conversation. Talking about seeing them again more often, I want that. *How often is often?* More regularly than once every three months, like this gap was since I saw them last. *Every two months, one month? Weekends?* Maybe it’s harder for them to find the time to join me together. *Would they come and see me more often if it was individually sometimes?*

I have no idea. I don’t even know the true extent of the other commitments they have to deal with.

Maybe tomorrow, in the morning, we can figure something out. Work out the next time we’ll be able to get together will be, at least.

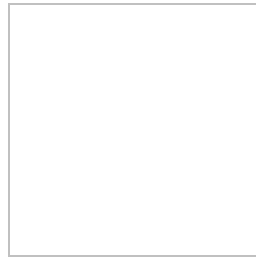
Will they still be here in the morning?

The thought strikes me and makes my stomach twist. That first night, they'd had other business to attend to and had to leave before I woke. I don't want to let them go like that, but I'm too exhausted to ask. I'm already dozing and can't force myself awake enough to say the words.

I just have to trust them.

I can hear the quiet murmur of their voices, reassuring even if I can't make out the words anymore, as I let sleep claim me.

And I sleep deeply. Last night was bad enough, but two nights of being thoroughly fucked in a row, knocks me out cold. I've had more sex in the past forty-eight hours than the entire rest of the year combined.



I don't dream.

I don't stir at all.

The next thing I'm aware of is a hand on my shoulder and Elias' voice murmuring my name.

I groan, still feeling like I could sleep for another day.

"Sorry to wake you, darling. There's only an hour until checkout."

It takes a moment for my brain to stir enough to process that, but I immediately sit up once Elias' words sink in. And regret it. Sudden movement was not a good idea.

"Ow." I gasp. I was so right about the painkillers. Everything aches, and I feel like I've strained muscles I didn't even know I had. I flop back down on the bed and wrap my arms around the pillow. "*Shit.*"

"Are you sore?"

"Little bit," I mumble.

“I can call reception and arrange for a later checkout time.”

“No... no. Dammit. I have to catch my bus home.” I bury my head and groan again. Sitting on a bus for hours is not going to be comfortable. Worth it, though.

Elias places his hands on my shoulders and rubs them. The gentle massage is nice enough that I find myself melting into the touch.

“It’s quite conflicting,” he says lowly. “I want to protect you from everyone else. And yet I rather enjoy seeing you like this, knowing it’s because of what I did. Only *I* get to break you.”

His tone is quiet and conversational, but there’s a far darker current beneath it. It makes my breath catch.

I probably shouldn’t be anywhere near as okay with that statement as I am, but there are certain risks that come with dating demons, and I knew that from the start. It’s always been part of the thrill. And I can’t lie. As much as my body aches now, that masochistic side of me loves the pain and loves that they’ve left their mark on me like this.

“As long as you put me back together afterward,” I say.

Elias presses his smile against my shoulder blade. “I can agree to that.”

As much as I would love to stay in bed for another short eternity, I know I don’t have the time to laze around. Elias is helpful, at least. He fetches me a glass of water to down, and Caelan reappears shortly afterward with food. A plateful of scrambled eggs and bacon, including about six extra strips of bacon he takes for himself, then casually chews while wandering around the room, helping Elias pack my things for me.

“Don’t you dare get bacon grease on my ballgown,” I warn him, waving my fork in a vaguely threatening manner in his general direction.

Caelan snorts. “Some thanks that is. I got you breakfast.”

“You could just not be an animal and stop eating with your hands,” Elias suggests to Caelan’s mock indignation.

Caelan leaves the packing, though. When I mildly ask if they have any

painkillers, Elias and Caelan share a look and Caelan immediately vanishes to get some. Literally vanishes, slipping through into the abyss. He returns just as quickly with a large pack of pills he drops into my hands.

I blink, then my eyes narrow. “Did you steal these?”

“Unimportant. You need ’em, right?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “One day, they’ll have you done for torture, murder, and petty theft.”

“I’d like to see them fuckin’ try,” he says with an utterly terrifying grin. A terrifying grin that he presses to my lips, and I’m all too willing to kiss him back despite his questionable behavior.

I take the painkillers.

Elias and Caelan are already fully dressed and entirely ready to face the day, while my morning is a mess of scrambling to get ready in time. I feel far better with food, drink, and painkillers in me, and I finally manage to drag myself out of bed to use the bathroom, sort out the mess of my sex-mussed hair, and splash some water on my face.

Elias was right about the marks he left—those weird black handprints. There’s no sign they were ever there. Their other marks remain, though. I still have all the knife scratches from Caelan, not to mention his name carved into the small of my back, countless minor bruises and love bites, and, of course, the collar Elias put on me last night.

I run my finger over it. Looking in the mirror is the first time I’ve seen it. It’s black as midnight but somehow ever so slightly iridescent. The most minute hint of deep red and purple hues buried within are revealed when it catches the light.

It’s gorgeous.

Being marked up like this, visibly claimed and wanted, makes me feel gorgeous too. I’ll wear all of it with pride.

The only downside to the morning is how little time I have to appreciate it. I get dressed, shove my pajamas into my bag, and the last of my packing is

done. We leave the room almost immediately.

I wish I had more time to spend with Elias and Caelan somewhere private.

Not that the lack of privacy seems to bother Caelan. They walk me down to the lobby, and Caelan pulls me roughly against him and kisses me firmly. With tongue. For several minutes.

Elias has finished checking out before Caelan's done, and he interrupts us with a cough.

I'm out of breath and flustered but incredibly flattered, even if we were probably making a scene in public.

"When do you need to leave for your bus?" Elias asks smoothly.

"Pretty much now," I admit reluctantly. *God. I don't want to leave them.*

"Then we shouldn't keep you."

He's right, and I hate it.

Elias doesn't kiss me the way Caelan did. He has some sense of decorum, only taking my hand in one of his own, and the other he rests on my waist, holding me in a loose embrace. The gesture may be simply affectionate, but the intensity of the look in his eyes leaves me as breathless as Caelan did.

"Don't be sad to say goodbye."

"But I'm going to miss you both so much."

"You're ours now, officially." Elias grazes his fingers over my collar, then hooks one beneath it and tugs lightly to draw me in closer. "It won't be so long before we see you again. And anything you need in the meantime, don't hesitate to contact us."

"Yes, Sir," I say, and Elias smirks.

Elias' kiss is far more brief, not as deep, and to anyone looking from the outside, it probably looks like the socially acceptable level of tender and romantic. But there's a heat in it that makes my knees feel weak and subtle possessiveness in the way Elias holds me.

"Don't make yourself late," Elias reminds me, and I sigh. I should go.

“Trust me. We ain’t gonna be leaving you alone for long after that,” Caelan cuts in, a suggestive grin on his face. “You’re too much fun to keep our hands off.”

I laugh. Caelan’s reasoning may be somewhat more risqué, but it is reassuring at the same time.

“I’ll look forward to it,” I say, grinning in return. I hesitate for a moment, but screw it. I already admitted it yesterday in far more vulnerable circumstances. “I love you both. Don’t keep me waiting too long, all right?”

Maybe that’s too forward. Who am I to be making demands of them? But neither of them seems offended.

Elias chuckles. “We wouldn’t dream of it,” he says smoothly, bringing my hand to his lips and kissing my knuckles. Again, a seemingly simple gesture of affection. But my mind immediately and vividly recalls how he did the same in the middle of our threesome last night, and heat rushes to my face. Trust him to make me so incredibly flustered over the smallest thing.

Caelan cackles at my reaction and ruffles my hair. “See ya later, doll.”

I nod. Then, before my resolve can fail and I give in to the urge to give up on going home and just stay with them, I pick up my bags and turn away.

The bus stop is around the corner, on the side of the hotel we left from when going to the restaurant on our first evening together.

I get as far as the sliding glass doors of the lobby before giving in to the temptation to look back over my shoulder.

Elias and Caelan are already gone.

Chapter Sixteen

The end of the semester means exams and deadlines.

I wish I could treasure the weekend and think of them forever, but I'm all too quickly dragged back into reality.

Thank God it's not as bad as being an undergraduate, with an exam and project due for almost every module, and those being numerous. Doing a master's part-time has been blissful in that regard, but the work is far more complex. I force myself to put Elias and Caelan from my mind as much as I can and *pay attention*.

I've never been much good at managing my time. I always used to let things get away far, far too easily, leaving them until the last minute and still doing well enough—a dangerous precedent to set. One day I won't be able to pull it off, and I know that, but it's so hard to focus when I don't really care.

That makes it sound bad. It's not that I don't *care*. It's that I know I'm going through the motions. I've come to recognize that now. There is a core of something genuine in there, the same as with my job. I do like what I do. I'm interested in my degree subject, or I was when I started, but learning for pleasure is one thing. The rigors of academics are another, and that has taken its toll. College was a means to an end. Only, there is no end I wish to achieve.

The future has always been a looming, daunting prospect. Listless and

directionless. I tried to avoid thinking about it too much and was only met with apathy at best and dread at worst.

Yet, for the first time in as long as I can remember, I'm truly excited for things to come, all because of Elias and Caelan. I'm excited to get to know them more, and for a future that has them in it.

Elias has been encouraging my singing, even just as a hobby. It's one of the few things, aside from being with them, that is both a passion and comfort. I'd forsaken it, deeming it useless, but I realize I've been missing the creative outlet.

Elias, of course, sings for Goëtica for a living. He sings for me sometimes during our calls, and he's coaxed me into singing for him in return. It's intimidating, given that he's damn *good*, but he does seem to genuinely enjoy it. Whether he enjoys my voice or merely being able to encourage me, I don't know, but it's sweet of him.

Between them, feeling wanted for the first time in longer than I can remember, connected, understood, and pursuing something for the simple joy of it again, I feel so much happier and more confident in myself. That makes everything else easier to bear.

I'm better with them.

The end of the semester also means the holiday season. Even when I went to the gala, decorations were already going up. By the time I've finished my exams, Christmas is imminent.

I'm not very bothered, honestly. The holiday is enjoyable enough, but I have no real attachment to it. I was happy to put the thought of it out of my mind entirely while dealing with classes.

Elias and Caelan, unsurprisingly, do not care at all about the holiday season. Elias describes it as "quaint, but utterly irrelevant." Of course, it is. I laugh at the notion. Why would a pair of demons have any interest in something like Christmas? I wasn't expecting them to, and I'm not invested myself, so it doesn't bother me that they clearly have no intentions to spend

any time with me or on me for that purpose.

As for Caelan, he finds the forced cheer and incessant jingling melodies utterly infuriating. “ ’Tis the season to *stab a bitch*,” he muttered acidly when I brought it up jokingly one time. I laughed until my stomach hurt.

Elias spends most of the holidays trying to prevent Caelan from committing homicide, I’m quite certain.

In any case, they assure me they don’t celebrate the holiday in any way, shape, or form and are insistent I don’t get them any gifts. I agree, on the condition they follow their own damn rules and don’t get me anything. I know what Elias can be like with spending money on unnecessarily fancy things for me.

Despite that, I *do* find that Elias has arranged and paid for me to begin singing lessons with a tutor near my college come the start of the next semester.

“After our discussions, it was something I intended to do for you regardless,” he maintains when I try to call him out on going back on our agreement. “The time of year is inconsequential.”

“*Elias...*”

“You are not calling me a liar, are you, Shannon?” Elias says in a smooth, deep baritone, the rumble of a teasing threat buried amongst his words. It makes me shiver, and my train of thought gets thoroughly derailed after that. All it takes is him using that dominating tone to make me melt.

I do trust him, and it’s not like I can be mad at him after he’s been both generous and that thoughtful. Gift or not, it was meant genuinely. I don’t doubt that.

Besides, even if Elias and Caelan *had* been remotely inclined to spend the holidays with me, my family had already staked their claim on my time. There is certainly no getting out of that at such short notice, especially when I’m so terrible at keeping in contact during the rest of the year. My mom has to demand to see me as it is.

Family gatherings are bustling, and I don't mind. The more people, the more distractions, the easier it is for me to slip through the cracks. I can simply be present and nod or hum while everyone else does the talking.

Of course, because my brother and sister are both younger than me and already in serious relationships, the questions start with, "So how come they've settled down and I'm still single?"

I hadn't thought to prepare any answers for the Spanish Inquisition, and it catches me off guard.

"What about you, Shannon? Have you met anyone yet?" my grandma asks, in that well-meaning but interfering way elderly ladies with too much time on their hands sometimes have, and I flounder.

Which is worse? To say no, and get the same old, needless sympathy, advice, and reassurances of 'oh, you'll find someone' that's already grown tiresome? It's meant to be *reassuring*, of course, but it is so damn aggravating to have the expectation shoved in my face. *What if I simply preferred not to have a relationship?* No one is any less for being single for as long as they damn well want to be, especially if they never have a relationship at all, and the simpering *pity* over it gets on my nerves.

Or else I admit yes and get the infuriating 'I told you so' from my aunt-in-law.

I can't tell them the truth. Certainly not entirely.

Somehow, I don't think it'd go down too well to admit I've been getting banged by two demons.

"M-maybe," I say, stumbling over my words. "I've... been seeing someone, but it's not official or anything, so I don't want to say too much. Don't want to jinx it, you know?" I laugh lightly, trying to wave it off.

Technically, it *isn't* official. None of us have ever clarified what our relationship is exactly.

I'm in love with them, and they both left permanent markings of their claim on me.

Oh, yes, and that's another thing. The collar Elias put on me is subtle enough that no one thinks anything of it. It looks like any other choker necklace to them. There's something of a thrill to it, having the mark of his ownership on display for all the world, flaunting it right in front of my family. They don't know how significant it is.

And Caelan's mark. The wound healed with no issues, leaving pale, jagged lines of scar tissue. It's subtle but visible. Visible to me, at least, knowing that it's there. The position means it's almost always covered, thankfully, since that one would be impossible to explain away. But I still look at it in the mirror after every time I shower, reaching around to trace the lines of his name carved into me.

Talking to them every day is something I look forward to after the delicate balance of tiptoeing around family. Well, as far as the nuclear family unit goes, I'm incredibly lucky. But the constant polite conversation with the extended family I barely know grates on me—far too much performative social interaction.

It's nice to excuse myself at the end of the day and take a moment to chat with Elias and Caelan instead. Video calls with them are interesting in many ways. Their power and presence leeching into their surroundings can create some curious distortion and glitches in the stream, particularly if either of them gets worked up about anything.

Still, talking to them feels like a breath of fresh air, so much easier. They don't drain me the way others do.

"Could always murder 'em for you," Caelan causally suggests after I express my sentiments on the matter.

I giggle. "They're not *that* bad."

"It would be incredibly impractical," Elias says. "We are, sadly, not strictly above your laws while stuck here. It would hardly be impossible to cover our tracks or avoid inquiry, but inconvenient. I am always the one who handles the work of cleaning up after Caelan's messes, as it is."

Caelan rolls his eyes. “I fuckin’ know that.” He then mutters under his breath, “Won’t let me damn well forget it, spoilsport.”

I roll over onto my stomach on the bed, placing my laptop on the pillow and readjusting the camera so they can see me in the video feed better before settling my chin on my folded arms. “I mean, it’s not like they’re *all* bad. My sister is cool. You’d probably like her. She has a girlfriend now. They’re cute together.”

“Oh? You have not spoken about your family much.”

I shrug. “Not much to say.”

“They are... accepting?”

“Oh, yeah, they’re fine. I didn’t exactly mention us. They’re fine with my sister and all, but I’m not sure how the whole two-demons thing would go down.”

“You know exactly how we go down, doll.”

“*Caelan.*” I snicker, then cough. “My brother’s fiancé’s parents were glaring like they wanted to start some shit, but I went and hung out with my sister and Ella, that’s her girlfriend’s name, and we were aggressively supportively gay for a bit to piss ’em off. I’ve been with them to Pride a few times.”

“I see. Family dynamics seem complicated.”

“Yeah. Well. That’s why I avoid them for most of the part.” I pause for a moment, deflating a little. “I feel like it’s somehow kind of hypocritical to be celebrating Pride and stuff when I’m in a basically straight relationship now.”

“Are you?” Elias asks with a tilt of his head.

My brows furrow slightly, not sure what he is getting at.

“We are technically agender and also pansexual.”

I blink and sit up straighter. “You... what?” That’s not something that’s come up before. I suppose there was no reason for it to.

Caelan throws his hands up. “*Technically.* Y’all have so many dumb fuckin’ labels. I don’t give a shit.” He vanishes off the screen for a moment,

though only to get more snacks, leaving Elias alone at the desk for the time being.

He shakes his head. “Demons, or other creatures like us, are beings of energy first and foremost. Physical forms are predominantly irrelevant. The same applies to both how we view ourselves and our attraction to others.”

“Yeah... yeah.” I remember he did sort of say that. “I guess it never clicked that it would mean you guys don’t really do gender the same.”

Elias considers for a moment. “I have a dick,” he states.

Without engaging my brain at all, with zero thought and zero filter, my mouth opens, and I instantaneously reply, “Oh, I am *very* aware of that.”

There’s a split-second silence as I process the conversation, then proceed to crack up and laugh until I’m wheezing.

“I’m, I’m sorry!” I gasp helplessly. “That just caught me off guard.”

Elias is watching me through the video feed with an expression of infinite patience, but the quirk of his lips betrays that he is fighting very hard not to laugh himself. “What I meant to say, my dear, was that yes, those closed-minded individuals who judge only on external appearances would therefore assume it to be a straight relationship.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” It was just damn funny the way he said it out of nowhere... and how quickly my brain, running on complete autopilot, had to make an innuendo out of it.

They make me laugh so much.

Being around them is just an absolute joy.

I adore them.

Caelan returns and sits back down, leaning into Elias’ personal space to get a better view of the camera as he cracks open the bottle of cider he’s also collected during his brief departure. “What the hell did I miss?” he asks, eyeing my flushed face and the way my shoulders are still shaking with giggles.

“Just Elias being inadvertently hilarious,” I say. “So, if it’s not a stupid

question, or too personal... how did you end up being men, then? Could you have equally been women? Or something else entirely?"

"Hmm... no. We are not strictly just demons, after all."

If I would just stop being amused and used my brain, that should have been obvious. "Right. Of course. The little fragment of human soul."

"The ones we were unfortunately entangled with were both males. As this is the only part of us with any tie to a physical body, our current forms are influenced by their original appearance."

"Isn't that... weird?"

"They perished at the time. And it was several decades ago now. It is what it is."

The mood feels more somber now, but I don't mind that so much. It's an honor to learn anything more about them. "Could you have chosen a different form?"

"Perhaps, once."

"Can you *shapeshift*?"

Caelan snorts. "Whatcha so interested for? Want to see us with tits or something?"

"No, Caelan," I protest. Not that I would mind that, now he mentions it.

"We cannot," Elias interrupts before that thought goes any further. "As demons alone, we could have taken any form we liked. Humanoid or... more monstrous. But just as we are bound here, we are also bound to the bodies we have now. We can only alter our surface appearance in the form of a glamour."

"I understand."

"I ain't complaining," Caelan drawls. "If I'm gonna be stuck in this shitty dimension in a shitty human form for fuck knows how long, I want a *dick*."

That sets me off again, and I end up with tears in my eyes and my sides aching. I'm laughing so hard that it attracts the attention of my mom. She sticks her head into my room, which is my sister's old one before she took

mine once I moved out for college, to raise an eyebrow and ask what I'm doing.

"Sorry. Funny video," I try to explain, muting the laptop quickly.

She accepts that, and we say our goodnights. It's late. *When did it get so late?* Almost midnight already. I always lose track of time when I get into conversations with Elias and Caelan.

"Sorry about that," I say, sighing, after I'm left alone again, and the door is closed safely behind me. "I suppose I ought to go before I disturb anyone else."

"Of course. It's late for you."

"Yeah. Unlike you guys, I do need to sleep at some point," I tease.

Caelan smirks. "'Course. Hope you have sweet dreams, doll." From that expression and tone, it's clear what type of dreams he means.

"Mmm... who needs dreams when I have you?"

"You truly are quite adorable," Elias says. "Rest, darling."

I gradually extract myself from the video call, then shut down my laptop and finish preparing for bed. Of course, once I'm in bed and lying down to sleep, my mind decides to start overthinking things again.

Do they mind that I'm keeping us a secret?

It didn't seem so bad when I was panicking, trying to respond to questions I didn't want to answer, and it wasn't really anyone's business to be asking anyway. *But to straight up deny them while they were right there watching?*

They mean so damn much to me. *Isn't the least I can do to acknowledge them?*

It settles like an uneasy pit in my stomach. It's not that I don't want to tell the entire damn world how much I adore them. If I could scream it from the rooftops, I would, but I fear judgment too much. My family may accept some things, but polyamory isn't something that's ever come up. I don't know how they would react, and that worries me.

I have no intention of explaining the demon aspect. That one is not my secret to share.

Maybe my concern is that they would react the same way Grace did. That they'd worry that because of their station, with Elias and Caelan being successful rock stars and all, they were only using me or saw me just as a groupie.

I'm a lot more reassured of where I stand now. It won't be as bad as when Grace expressed her worries. Back then, after only one night and no idea what the future held, those doubts had already rooted deep, and I was trying so hard not to let them swallow me. Such a delicate balancing act between euphoria and abject despair. Hearing it spoken aloud was far too abrupt of a shift in that balance, and it had cut to the core.

Now? They've claimed me, no doubt of that. They have spent so much of their time humoring me with messages and video calls. And, of course, the whole gala weekend, just a few weeks ago.

I don't have those doubts anymore. Certainly, if they have any ulterior motives, they've invested far too much time and effort for it to be anything as shallow as only wanting sex. I can't truly claim to understand the minds or motives of any demon, but for better or worse, I trust them.

That doesn't mean it wouldn't be aggravating to have our relationship picked over and questioned by people who don't have the first clue of what they're like.

Then again, I suppose I'm *their* secret too. Not that they have family to tell, but there are media and fans. They're always so private about their lives behind the smokescreen performance for Goëtica. Elias and Caelan, and the demons on stage, they're worlds away from each other.

Other than some of the backstage photos and gossip, the songs they play for me, or when they send me riffs of new things they're working on, I am not involved with that side of their life. It's not as if they do the whole rock-star lifestyle and party thing in any serious capacity. The very thought is

laughable, given Elias is about as social as I am, and Caelan finds most people to be too irritating to bear.

Between that and being *particularly* elusive, thanks to their inhuman skill sets, they've never had any bother with paparazzi. I know full well even the most basic information about them isn't available anywhere.

If people like that were to find out about us, though, that could be a problem. More so for *me* than them, even. It's probably never even occurred to them to eventually make our relationship public because nothing about their life is. The possibility of it never occurred to me until now, either.

I'm fine with that. I am very firmly fine with that. The whole celebrity, paparazzi, glitz, and glamour of LA deal—not my scene at all. I can see the appeal of, and could totally go for, a few drinks and a party with some friends, but a whole lifestyle of it would never work for me.

I can't deny I'm *glad* Elias and Caelan aren't into that scene, either.

They really are perfect, aren't they?

Reassured, I roll over and hug my pillow, breathing out deeply. I extremely doubt anyone in my family would rat me out about it or would be believed if they did. I already trusted Grace with the information, though I didn't know it would be anything more than a fling then. But I don't feel guilty about not telling them anymore.

Sometime, perhaps one day, depending on how serious this gets. *Hah. Serious. As if they don't already have their claws sunk so, so deep into me.* Regardless, it's a conversation we'll have to have before I go blabbing anywhere.

Speaking of Grace.

The holiday and my stint visiting home is short. Of course, everyone wants the time off, and there are plenty of extra shifts to pick up. I take advantage of the momentary respite from schoolwork between semesters to pick up more hours at the lab instead. There's no harm in getting extra income, especially after buying gifts for family.

I bought a present for Grace too. Nothing major, only generic chocolates and a cute notebook set. In return, she got me a black crystal pendant.

“It seemed like your low-key goth aesthetic,” she teases. At first, I think that’s all there is to it, and am ready to thank her and maybe coo over the crystal in appreciation, but her tone grows more somber. “I think it’d be good if you wear it.”

There’s something that feels odd about the statement. Not just an ‘it would suit you’ or ‘I’d like you to.’ Something more

“Huh? How come?” I ask.

Grace laughs, but there’s the slightest edge to it. Nerves. That’s not like her. What could she possibly be nervous about?

“Humor me. I don’t even believe in any of that stuff myself, but my mom messes around with crystals, and I just... I worry about you. That’s black tourmaline. Good for protection, apparently. And it looks nice, so no harm, right?”

I blink. “What... exactly do you think I need protection from?”

She takes hold of my arm, just above my elbow, and gives it a gentle squeeze. “Just be careful. I know... look, I *know* you hate me saying it, but something about those boys of yours doesn’t sit right with me. You’re still seeing them, yeah?”

“Yes,” I admit.

“Something gives me a bad feeling. Humor me and wear it, okay.”

I smile, hoping it doesn’t look as tight and fake as it feels. The conversation, any conversation like this, tightens something in my chest and gets me weirdly defensive over Elias and Caelan. “Sure, if it’ll make you feel better.”

As if a crystal necklace could protect me from any demons, even if I *did* need protecting from them.

To appease her, I wear it for the day. But that she doesn’t trust me, doesn’t trust my trust in them, leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

Before bed, I take the pendant off, tossing it into my jewelry box to be forgotten.

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Chapter Seventeen

As busy as things are with work and the next semester starting, the time goes quickly.

Yet as busy as I am, there isn't a day that goes by without me thinking of them.

There isn't a day that goes by without us talking either, sometimes through calls, other times only by text. But the chance to meet them again in person doesn't come up until several weeks into the new year.

There's first the issue of where to meet. It's a trek for me to go up to LA every time I want to see them and doing so would leave simple evening visits completely implausible. Besides, what's even the point of me making the journey when they're the ones who can travel wherever they like through the gap between dimensions?

So, I invite them to my home.

It's not much, and it's a far cry from the fancy hotels Elias has taken us to before. A very far cry.

All I have is a mediocre studio apartment. Not even a separate bedroom, just a tiny bathroom and one room for everything else—bed, wardrobe, desk, television, and a small counter with a sink, microwave, and minifridge that serves as a pathetic excuse for a kitchen. But it's my own space, and I don't have to share it with any roommates, which is a significant step up from my

first few years at college.

Even though I spent an unnecessary amount of time tidying up beforehand, my heart is fluttering, and I'm still embarrassed I live here. It is so far beneath Elias' standards.

His eyes narrow, and he frowns when I first show them in, but he never makes me feel ashamed. He's only angry on my behalf. "How much are they making you pay for this? You deserve far more for how hard you work."

Trying to explain that's just how prices and wages balance out doesn't seem to help, and it takes a lot of reassurances and insistence that, yes, I'm serious, to talk the two of them out of speaking to the manager of the apartment complex. I don't entirely know how they intended to 'renegotiate my contract' for me, but I'm certain it would have involved a significant number of threats.

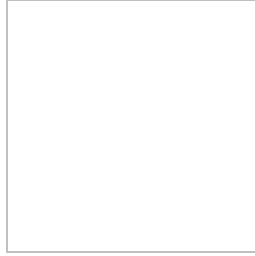
Oddly, though, this sets me at ease. Their care is incredibly flattering, even if their methods are questionable.

At the end of the day, it is what it is, and it's surreal, in a way, to have them in my room. Elias and Caelan, actually there. Caelan is sitting against the edge of my desk and messing up the papers and notes I'd just carefully piled, and Elias reclines on my bed because I don't have room for a sofa. Aside from the shitty computer chair I've draped myself over, there's nowhere else to sit.

They look so out of place. Powerful and gorgeous, with enough presence to bring me to my knees, constrained in such a mediocre setting. It brings back a pang of my old insecurities for a moment.

Who the hell am I to drag them down to my level?

Still, I forget all about that the first time they lay me down and fuck me in my own bed, hard enough to make the headboard slam back against the wall.



It is easier for them to make the time to visit me more often if they come separately sometimes. There's hardly room for me in my apartment, never mind both of them as well, so it works out. I stay in with Caelan more often. He's less busy and gets bored without company when Elias is working. Nights in with pizza, popcorn, and a movie, sprawled against each other on the bed, become a near-weekly occurrence.

Elias is still more inclined to take me out, though I adamantly refuse to allow him to treat me to expensive restaurants constantly. Even if he says money is no concern, I still feel guilty. Instead, I introduce him to my local coffee shop.

It's not far, only a block from where I live, and open twenty-four-seven. Sometimes, it becomes almost like a second home when I have a lot of work to do and end up staying there until two or three in the morning. That suits me just fine since late in the evening is the only time I have free to spend with Elias and Caelan.

It's firmly in the realm of night by the time I step out of my apartment building with Elias on a crisp, late January evening.

He's in a smartly cut waistcoat, formal as ever. His hair falls across his face, shadowing the deep, dark gray eyes of his glamour. The carefully groomed pattern of his facial hair accentuates his features perfectly.

Elias takes my hand as he walks beside me, and even after all this time, it still makes my heart flutter.

While we're stopped at the crossing, I lean up and nuzzle against him, pressing a soft kiss against the underside of his jaw. He raises an eyebrow at me.

“You’re gorgeous,” I say by way of explanation, which makes Elias laugh. It feels like he laughs more often and more freely around me now, and I love it. It’s only ever quiet, unlike Caelan’s enthusiastic cackle, but Elias’ laugh is rich and deep, and I can feel the vibration if he laughs while I’m resting against him.

I duck my head, realizing I’m getting caught up in my own thoughts again. I’m still so head over heels for them, it’s embarrassing.

We’re not far from the coffee shop, at least. The place isn’t high-class, but it has a quaint charm. It’s a small chain, just two or three branches within the city, with eclectic décor somewhere between pop culture and antique. There are 80s and 90s comic prints on the walls, but there are also gilded chairs positioned around marble tables and a statue of a sphinx in the middle of the room. Because reasons, I suppose.

“What would you like?” I ask Elias. “Usual?”

“Darling, that’s unnecessary.”

“Hush,” I inform him, inelegantly waving away his attempts to reach for his wallet while fumbling with my own. “It’s only one damn coffee.”

I want to do something for him in return, as small as the gesture is.

“Sometimes you really are as stubborn as Caelan,” Elias notes.

“I’m going to assume that’s a compliment.”

Elias only smirks in response.

I take our drinks, an espresso for Elias and a spiced chai latte for me, since I want to be able to sleep at some point, and slide into a booth. Elias joins me, and I immediately lean in against him.

“You’re affectionate tonight,” he says, quietly amused.

I lightly snort. “Am I ever not?” I wonder if I’m a little too affectionate sometimes. Neither of them are tender sorts, and I don’t want to overdo it to the point of irritating them. But they’ve never reacted negatively. Not yet, at least.

Elias chuckles. “I suppose that’s fair.”

“I just enjoy spending time with you. And it’s been... a day. I could use some affection.”

Elias frowns at that. He takes a sip of the coffee I procured for him, then puts it down on the table, letting his arm snake around my waist instead. “Is there anything you would like to talk about? Anyone that needs dealing with?” His eyes flash dangerously with the second offer.

“At least you’re more subtle and don’t straight up suggest murdering people like Caelan does,” I say, grinning. “No. I’m just tired. Assignments. Exams. Work. Human bullshit.”

His frown doesn’t waver any. “We’re distracting you from your other obligations.”

“No! God, no. You and Caelan are the best thing I have in my life. The rest is just... just that. Obligations. Things dragging on and stress piling up. I just want to get my degree done and get out at this point.”

“Hmm... if you’d rather not go anywhere tonight...”

“I want to,” I immediately affirm. I already feel more at ease just being at Elias’ side, with a warm drink clutched between my hands, leaning casually into Elias as I observe the rest of the coffee shop bustle about. “You said you had something planned?”

He presses a kiss to my temple. “Nothing important.” A crooked little smile. “I have taken note of your request not to spoil you too much, as unnecessary as I feel it is.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Paying for my coffee is still not required of you, either.”

“Shh. Let me have this one thing.”

He tilts his head slightly, the corner of his mouth quirking up. Then he lifts my chin and kisses me, which is payment enough. Sighing against him, I can taste the coffee on his lips and tongue as he deepens the kiss for a moment.

“I thought it would be nice to go for a drive tonight if you feel up for it.”

I blink. “A drive? Did you drive all the way down just for this?”

Elias hesitates for a moment too long. “It’s not so far.”

“That’s a three-hour drive when you could have just been here in a few moments,” I point out. “Unless you can drive through the abyss.”

He chuckles at the notion. “No,” he says, then pauses to take another sip of his coffee. “Do you not think you’re worth the time?”

Not really, honestly. “It’s more a matter of efficiency...”

“If I didn’t come by car, I wouldn’t be able to take you on a scenic drive to sit at the clifftops and gaze at the stars. So, it was obviously a necessity,” Elias says smoothly. And he’s so captivating when he puts on his charm that I almost forget what I was protesting about in the first place. He laughs at my flustered expression. “Don’t worry yourself, dear. I enjoy the occasional long journey to clear my head.”

I stare down at my drink, swirling it slightly in my hands. Something about the whole thing still doesn’t quite sit right. Elias is such a workaholic and always values efficiency. Perhaps I’m overthinking. Maybe that’s exactly why he needs the excuse for time to himself to think. *Still.*

“You know. You’re always so worried about interfering with my life and dragging me away from human shit...”

“I have to be. If I had my way, I’d keep you all to myself forever.”

My head jerks up to stare at him. He says it so nonchalantly, yet the statement makes my stomach flip. I’m not sure if it’s with concern, joy, or both.

He gives me a small smile. “I am...” he says, voice tight, “... *trying* to be better for you.”

Because yeah, I’ve seen how intense Elias can get when letting his possessiveness show. I’ve only seen it slip in any significant way in bed, but that doesn’t mean those feelings ever go away just because we’re not being intimate at any given moment.

His. Forever. I turn the idea over in my mind. “I’m not entirely opposed

to that option.”

“Darling. Don’t tempt me.” He closes his eyes, expression strained. There’s a low growl in his voice. “I want to *own* everything about you and your existence. And yet, the more I come to care for you, the more I desire what is in your best interests. Your happiness, your success, for you to live a normal life to the fullest. Do you understand my conflict?”

“I...” I let my words trail off, not sure what I want to say. A part of me very much wants to disagree that the two are mutually exclusive. Being with Elias and Caelan and forgetting all else sounds like the best life imaginable, but I know that’s just my lovesick desperation speaking. Elias is trying so hard to be reasonable, to create a healthy balance for me, and who am I to make that more complicated for him?

The turn the conversation has taken makes my heart ache.

“I was just going to say,” I amend. “You worry about interfering with my life, but am I not interfering with yours?”

Elias looks surprised for a moment, then chuckles. “Hardly, dear.”

“No, but seriously. You’ve done so much for me. Driving all this way, visiting all the time. You’ve been staying in LA instead of traveling recently, haven’t you? And all the things for the band that need doing...” I glance down at the safe neutrality of my drink. “What If *I’m* the one getting in *your* way?”

“As much as I hate to admit Caelan is right about anything, perhaps, in this case, he has a point. He has often told me I ought to work less and enjoy existence more.”

“I think the way he usually phrases it is that you need to ‘take the stick out of your ass.’ ”

He huffs a short laugh. “Yes. That too.” Elias finishes his coffee in silent contemplation before continuing. “I admit... I prefer to allow my work to consume me and find joy elsewhere. It’s easier to adamantly forge forward rather than dwelling on the past.”

Their past. That's still a thorny subject and one I still know so little about, despite how much we've talked about so much else. It's unusual for Elias to mention anything about it at all.

"Because that's not something worth thinking or talking about, right?"

Elias smiles, but it's tight, sad. "Not where we may be overheard, certainly. The matter is complicated. But I'm certain you must have questions." He stands and offers me his hand. "Come. We'll drive. If there are things you would like to know..." he tilts his head, staring at me with eyes that feel like they can pierce right through my soul, "... perhaps tonight I can attempt to explain."

I stare at him in genuine surprise. It's so much more than before. It wasn't long ago he would immediately shut down or redirect any efforts I made to learn about his life.

Allowing him to help me up, I murmur, "Thank you." Not so much for the assistance but the trust he's offering by being willing to let me at least ask. I don't know if he knows what I mean, but the matter isn't worth clarifying.

Elias doesn't let go, taking my arm like a gentleman, and the sweet, old-fashioned gesture makes me smile. He keeps my arm in his for the entire way back to the apartment complex, where he'd parked in one of the visitor spaces, and opens the door for me with a nod.

I slide into the passenger seat, glancing over at Elias.

Is 'immediately' too early to pick up our conversation? Perhaps.

"Where are we going?" I ask instead.

Elias responds with a non-committal hum. "Toward the coast. I think it would be nice to find a pleasant overlook of the oceanside."

He was serious about the scenic drive and stargazing, then.

"Sounds romantic," I tease. And I am only teasing, but Elias shoots me a look in return and leans over to kiss me firmly, and the abrupt affection leaves me flustered.

Even though the end of January makes it five months now, and we've been on more than a few real dates, sometimes he'll do something sweet that catches me off guard and leaves me blushing like a schoolgirl.

I duck my head and turn to stare out the window, watching the lights flash past as Elias pulls out of the parking area and heads toward the freeway.

Now that the option is there, what do I ask? Elias said it was complicated. I don't even know where to begin.

"Elias..." I start hesitantly.

There's a slight increase in the tension of his hands on the steering wheel. "You're curious. Ask then, dear. I cannot promise an answer, but I will provide what information I can."

I pause. Maybe I don't even want an answer, but at the same time, not knowing eats me up inside. "Is it... unpleasant? Your past?"

"Yes," Elias acknowledges. "We're demons. We're not pleasant creatures."

I let the silence lie after that. It's not an uncomfortable silence, despite the weight of the claim. Elias simply seems thoughtful, his expression serious.

When he speaks again, we've left the city, and the freeway is lined with trees, with a hint of ocean salt tangible in the air.

"Caelan still struggles sometimes with what we are, in terms of the touch of humanity we gained. And I understand that. It is... difficult to be viewed as an abomination."

"You're not abominations at all," I cut in.

Elias laughs grimly. "You are sweet but not even remotely familiar with the world beyond yours. We are powerful, but abominations. Even if our situation allowed us to traverse dimensions as before, we would be distinctly unwelcome." He spares a long glance at me. "I will tell you the full story if you would like. Abbreviated."

"I would like," I agree readily.

"You understand that 'demons' is just a colloquialism we use. It is the

closest descriptor your language has for what we are. But we are, simply, or rather..." his expression darkens for a second, "... we're creatures of another plane."

I nod. "I understand."

"A long time ago, we were viewed as... old gods, I suppose you would say."

"You're an *old god*?"

Elias laughs at my shock. "No more than we are true demons. Vernacular of the time."

"What time was that?" I ask, staring at him as I try to wrap my head around this new information.

He shrugs lightly. "I could not say for sure. A few thousand years ago."

The blood drains from my face. "You're that old?" I knew, obviously and without a doubt, that the age gap was significant. Technically speaking, they do not age the same way, but thousands of years is pushing it, surely.

"No. For the vast majority of that time, I was sealed in an ageless stasis."

"Oh. Okay." *That's better, I suppose?* Though it raises a whole host of new questions. "How does that happen?"

Elias' knuckles tighten slightly on the wheel. I don't often see the anger he vents into a lot of Goëtica's work in person, but now I see a flash of it across his face. He regains his control swiftly, but I do not miss how his lips curl up into a snarl.

"Petty jealousy and territorial struggles," he says disdainfully. "As I say, we were viewed as gods, of sorts. There was a time when my kind interacted more freely with your plane and often came to be worshiped. We embraced it. There were those who truly wanted to help, those who were merely mischievous, and those whose intentions were nothing but malicious."

"Which were you?" Perhaps that isn't a good question to ask, and Elias doesn't answer directly.

"There were those of us who enjoyed the attention and the power. For a

number, it became a point of pride and, eventually, a matter of outright war to have the largest following, the most wealth and sacrifices. It was meaningless in our plane, but such things have a way of getting out of hand.

“Some did not like how... *popular* I was.” His expression twists at the irony, how strange yet fitting such a modern word is for the situation. “I was targeted for it.”

“Yeah,” I agree softly. I cannot fathom what it must be like in those specific circumstances, but people tearing down others because they are jealous of someone’s success or power? That I have seen far too often. *That* I accept without question.

“The attacks were relentless. On myself, on my followers. Petty, pathetic —” He cuts himself off. I’ve never heard such vitriol in his voice before. Even knowing it is not at all directed at me, it sends ice through my veins.

“Such suffering caused, so needlessly. In the end, a number of those against me came to wage war in person, and I was cast from my plane.”

“That is how you got stuck here?”

“Almost. There is yet more to the story.” His eyes flicker for a moment, and this time, it does not appear to be rage on his face so much as sorrow. “The initial result was that I was placed in the ageless stasis of which I spoke earlier. I suppose I ought to be thankful I did not have any conscious awareness remaining to experience those thousands of years in purgatory.”

“But you got out,” I conclude.

Elias is silent for a very long time.

“You remind me of her,” he says at last, and I am certain now that is regret in his voice.

“Who?” I ask.

He rolls his shoulders and regathers himself. “Once I was cast out, my enemies, of course, attempted to eliminate all traces of me. They massacred my followers and anyone who had known me, destroyed all evidence, and otherwise did all they could to erase my name from history. They succeeded,

for most of the part. Until some time ago when the tiniest fragment of an artifact was discovered. A mirror that some followers had once used for scrying and communicating with me. She was the one who found it. She... listened to me. It was, you understand, only an echo of the past, the slimmest fraction of my power reflected in that shard, but it was enough to..."

Another pause while Elias considers his words. "The way I was back then, I was charming, charismatic. I gained the loyalty of those I had by offering them anything they desired."

The conversation matter is serious, but nonetheless, my lips quirk into a wry grin. "And you're not still all that?"

"What I gave always had a cost." Elias shakes his head. "Regardless, whatever she saw of me in that remnant, it was enough for me to sink my claws into her. She became fixated on summoning me and setting me free. As her attention fed me, I slowly stirred, and I guided her in some small part."

He taps the steering wheel, keeping his voice even by sheer force of will. "I was furious. I wanted to be free. I wanted *revenge*. I did not care what happened to anyone else in the process."

There are goose bumps on my arms. Elias and Caelan seem so human. They're kind to me, a little messed up, but not terrible people. Sometimes I forget just what they are and the sort of things they must have gone through—the sort of things they've done.

"She didn't survive," he says bluntly and abruptly.

I don't respond. What could anyone possibly say to that?

"There was a host form that I was to possess temporarily while I regained my strength. A... sacrifice. It did not work out as planned. Her ritual was interrupted. She had garnered quite the following for me in a short time, which was flattering, but it had also earned her enemies. Witch, they called her. Cultist, consort of demons. Pick your flavor of poison."

"Consort of demons," I repeat. *Oh, I am more than guilty of that one too.*

"Regardless, those locals who remembered the old powers and

superstitions did not take kindly to her. By the end of the infraction, half the town had burned. People died. I ended up stuck in the body I was supposed to possess as a temporary vessel. It was, as Caelan might put it, a bit of a shit show.”

“And the one who summoned you? She died too?”

“Mortally wounded and damaged to the core from the strain of the summoning. Her very soul was shattered. She did not last long.”

“Oh.” I glance out at the road for a long moment, watching the scenery blur past. “I’m sorry.”

The silence remains heavy.

Elias eventually sighs. “I did not think anything of it at the time. However, since becoming this strange, amalgamated thing with human emotions, I have come to regret her fate. I suppose my one solace is that I was there in the end. She looked upon my face as she died.”

“People really would do anything for you, huh?” I note quietly. I’m not sure why the observation occurred to me.

But Elias nods as if this is a perfectly reasonable thing to say. “I did have that effect. For better or worse.” Somber, he adds, “Usually worse.”

He turns to look at me once more, and his eyes are darker than I’ve ever seen.

“And then, now, there’s you,” he says, breathing out heavily as if he could release all the tension and pain of the past with it. “You make me want to be better. You, who are so sweet, so devoted. You give yourself so fully. You would have been perfect for me back then, and I would have consumed you.”

The way he says it is utterly chilling.

“Things are different now. That is not what I want, yet... is it any wonder I find you addictive?”

He turns back to focus on the road again, and I’m left with my head spinning in the heavy silence that follows. It is a lot to take in, but his last

statement flatters me beyond measure.

The car turns off the freeway, heading into more residential areas before Elias speaks again.

“So, yes. To answer your question. I imagine you would consider my past unpleasant. I don’t look back on it with any joy myself. Especially those who so craved my destruction in the first place.” His expression wavers, softening for a moment before returning to a hard stare forward. “Yet, as much as this existence was not our choice, perhaps I prefer who I get to be in this place. With you and Caelan, when I do not have to fight for the right to simply exist. There is a freedom in it, in an odd way.”

There’s a weight to that last statement I can’t even begin to comprehend.

I don’t quite know how I feel or how to process all of that. It’s a lot to take in. And maybe I understand a little more why Elias was so reluctant to talk about such matters.

We arrive at our destination, and the conversation is over. Elias pulls the car to a stop in a parking lot at the clifftop. There’s a wide grassy expanse in front of us before the ground falls away into sheer rock, and a wooden building to the side with a sign proclaiming it is some sort of glider port. It’s abandoned at this time of night.

Elias leaves the car and comes around to open my door for me. Still caught up in my thoughts, I fumble with my seat belt and step out to join him.

For a moment, we simply stand like that. Face to face, his expression cold and reserved as he awaits my judgment. I don’t know what to say, so I step forward and wrap my arms around him instead.

Elias chuckles, and his hand slides up my spine and tangles into my hair, holding me against him.

“Thank you,” I murmur, face buried against his shoulder. “For trusting me enough to talk to me.”

“Are you not scared?”

“I... don’t think so. I’ve always known what you were. I’ve accepted that.

And I guess I've accepted maybe I'm not the best person either, for being as willing as I am to overlook all of it."

"Hmm." He brushes a strand of hair from my face, staring at me contemplatively. "You are sweet."

"Sweet, perhaps, but morally gray at best."

The statement makes Elias laugh. "Regardless. That's enough of such unpleasant matters," he says. "Let's just enjoy the evening for what it is, shall we?"

I nod, happily agreeing to that.

Elias leads us out to the grassy lawn, not quite to the cliff's edge, but close enough to allow a stunning view of the ocean waves rolling against the beach far below. The soft rush of the water is the only sound in the otherwise still night. Even the hum of distant traffic is too far away to be noticeable.

It's a clear night. Chilly enough that I curl into myself and pull my hoodie tighter around my shoulders, but beautiful. The moonlight reflects like quicksilver over the crests of the waves, and the black sky is studded with the bright, glistening pinpricks of countless stars.

Elias takes off his jacket and lays it on the ground for me to sit on. I suppose the cold doesn't really bother him the same way. Then he settles next to me and gently pulls me close. His hand covers mine, and I twine our fingers together as we look at the sky.

"I like it out here," I say.

Elias smiles. "I thought you would."

"Am I that predictably easy to romance?" I laugh.

"Perhaps. But that's not such a bad thing."

It isn't. Not if it means Elias makes sweet gestures like this for me.

"Now. What of you?" Elias asks. "I have spoken enough of my history. What of your dark past?"

I can't quite tell if he is teasing me. His tone is lighthearted, but there is a curiosity and expectation in his gaze that desires a genuine answer.

I laugh. “Hardly. I can’t keep anything from you. I wear my heart on my sleeve too much for that. If I had any deep dark secrets I was hiding, you’d know them by now.” I consider a moment longer, then shake my head. “My family is kind. Happy. I grew up well enough. I never had many friends, but a couple. They drifted away over time, or we fell out. You know about that. I was just the school weirdo, the outcast sitting in the corner.”

The set of Elias’ mouth is beginning to harden. He is not as prone to violence as Caelan, but I can tell he is jumping to conclusions.

“No, I wasn’t bullied. Not really, not seriously. Stop making that face.”

Elias huffs quietly at being called out. He shifts his expression back to neutral and tilts his head in a gesture for me to continue.

A moment of silence hangs in the air. I’m not sure if I should add more, but what I said earlier was no exaggeration. I wear my heart on my sleeve with them. I can’t hide. I blurt out things I would never tell anyone else.

“I isolated myself more than anything. I struggled a lot with depression back then, so...”

The concern is clearly written in the furrow of Elias’ eyebrows. “You never—”

“No,” I say firmly. “It wasn’t that serious. It just... slowed me down a lot. I missed out on a lot of teenage things... parties, hobbies, making stupid mistakes.” I laugh. The sound of it is hollower than I intended. “Probably did myself a favor.” Elias is clearly not convinced. “It’s not a big deal, I promise.”

“You are too dismissive of your own suffering.”

“Elias. You and Caelan are demons who have gone through hell—quite possibly literally. I don’t know what your original plane of existence was like.”

He grunts. “Hell is accurate enough.”

“Exactly. Meanwhile, I have, what? Some trouble with my self-esteem, and I’m still trying to figure out exactly who I am and what I want from life.”

I sigh. Lying next to him, it all seems so small and inconsequential. “Everything always felt so suffocating. I couldn’t imagine just finishing my degree, getting a job, and working for the rest of my life. I was desperate to believe there was more to this existence, something bigger... then I met two demons.”

Elias chuckles. “Rare and flattering to have that considered a good thing.”

Though his tone is light, I remain adamantly serious. “You’ve changed my life. You know that? When I’m with you, I finally don’t feel trapped.”

“Are you not just swapping one binding for another?” Elias asks. He raises his hand and lets his fingers trail along the black collar around my neck.

“Utterly incomparable,” I answer, with an abruptness and intensity that’s enough to take me aback. “I would willingly follow you to the ends of the earth, and that’s a whole different matter.”

Elias doesn’t reply. I glance at him and find him staring back with darkness and a hunger in his eyes that makes my heart skip. The stars spin in the corners of my vision, and the world tilts as Elias flips me beneath him, looming over me and pinning me down. I make a small noise of surprise. A noise of very pleased surprise that’s swallowed up as Elias kisses me, and continues to kiss me until I’m breathless.

Apparently, that was very much the right thing to say.

“Mine,” Elias says, his lips still grazing against my mouth.

“Yours,” I agree, chest fluttering at the abrupt intensity. I reach up and place my hand against his cheek. “I feel safe with you, free with you. So much more confident. Like I can be myself.”

The night sky is deep, dark, and rich. Sighing softly, I look back up, basking in the soft, distant light of the constellations.

“I’ve always loved nights like this. They were the only times I could get even a taste of that freedom and hope.” I shyly grin up at him and lean in to initiate the next kiss. *I’m being sappy, but fuck it.* “You’re all that and so

much more. My Darkest Night,” I murmur.

Elias blinks for a moment, somewhat perplexed, but there’s a part of his expression that also looks rather flattered. “Is that a pet name?”

“I’m sorry if it’s disrespectful—”

“No.” Elias shakes his head slowly. He kisses me a few more times before answering, slow, exploratory kisses, almost tender. “Caelan’s the only one to ever refer to me by anything other than my name, and his idea of suitable pet names is... questionable. Yours is a little melodramatic, but I like it.”

I grin. “Yeah, it’s melodramatic. That’s why it suits you.”

He takes my bottom lip between his teeth, tugging on it and biting lightly in admonishment, and I giggle.

“Maybe we’re both melodramatic idiots sometimes,” I concede.

“Hmm... I think it would be best if we do not inform Caelan of this exchange,” Elias says in response, neither a confirmation nor denial. “He would tease both of us incessantly, I imagine.”

“He’d agree I’m right, though.”

“That is precisely my concern.”

“I love you, melodramatic edgelord and all.”

“I preferred your previous name.”

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, burying my face into the crook of his neck to muffle my laugh. I love him, and I love being with him, and it’s such mundane, teasing conversations that make me truly realize just how happy I am with him.

Elias finally lifts himself off me and lays at my side instead, allowing me to stare at the stars. Not that staring up at him was a view I disliked either.

No more needs to be said. I’m content to enjoy his company, the comfortable silence, and his captivating presence. Our shoulders press together as we lie next to each other, hands clasped between us. The soft static of his touch is a familiar sensation and feels somehow reassuring.

Embarrassingly quick and without any intention of doing so, I find myself starting to doze off. It's only when Elias slides his arms beneath my knees and around my shoulders to pick me up that I start back into wakefulness.

"I'm sorry," I attempt, sleepiness making my words sluggish. "I was up early for work and—"

"No need to apologize."

I rub my eyes. "Ugh. You brought me out on a date, and I'm falling asleep on you. I feel like I *should* apologize."

"I find it endearing you trust me enough to fall asleep so easily."

I raise my eyebrows at Elias for that comment, lips twisting into a sardonic smile. "I've been asleep around you plenty. Usually after having been thoroughly fucked by you."

Elias smirks, then attempts to cover it with a cough. "I expect you were simply thoroughly worn out in those cases and would have fallen asleep regardless of the circumstance."

I don't have time to refute the point. He's already carried me as far as the car, letting me slide out of his arms to get into the passenger seat instead. He tosses his jacket into the back seat.

"I'll take you home so you can get some proper rest."

Part of me wants to argue I'm not that tired, but I must admit even to myself it would be a lie. As much as I want to spend more time with Elias, we've had a pleasant enough evening, and he's certainly talked enough to give me food for thought for a long time.

Everything he said about his past...

The car ride lulls me back into dozing before I can truly think through anything, and I'm firmly asleep by the time we arrive back. I don't wake up properly, and I'm only half aware of small snippets of events around me—Elias carrying me inside, helping me undress until I'm stripped down to just my underwear and a T-shirt, tucking me into bed.

When I do stir and try to speak, he only hushes me and tells me to rest.

I sleep a few hours, more of a nap than a full night's sleep. Following an instinct driven by deeply entrenched bad habits, I reach for my phone the moment I surface back to consciousness, only to blink blearily in the dim half-light.

"Elias?"

He's still here.

He's dragged my desk chair over to the side of the bed, elbows resting on his knees as he watches me, somewhere miles away.

"Jesus. I know you don't need to sleep, but if you're gonna stay the night, get in bed with me instead of just sitting there like a creepy weirdo," I mumble.

Elias seems as though he's only just stirring from deep thought, processing the offer slowly as he cracks his neck and returns to focusing on the present. But once he has considered my words, he huffs a short laugh. "Creepy weirdo, is it now?" he murmurs. "We really are downgrading."

"Come to bed with me. Please, Sir?"

My attempts at backtracking only amuse him. But he seems willing enough to oblige, gifting me with the opportunity to watch him strip.

He's not even trying to make a show of it, just undressing. But that alone is enough that I can't tear my eyes away.

Elias hooks his fingers beneath the knot of his tie and pulls it loose. The veins on the back of his hands stand out against ashen pale skin as he slowly unbuttons his shirt, revealing the toned chest and stomach beneath. My gaze follows the lines of his hip bones down to the waistband of his trousers as Elias undoes his fly, stripping down to just his boxers.

I bite my lip to stop myself from grinning inappropriately. *It's moments like these that it really hits me just how hot he is.*

Eventually, I drag my eyes back up to find Elias smirking at me, one eyebrow raised. "Are you enjoying this, darling?"

I bury my face into the covers as if I could hide from him. I've already

been caught. “Maybe,” I admit, voice muffled.

He walks around to the other side of the bed and slides in behind me, kissing the back of my neck. I turn around in his arms to face him, resting my hands on his chest and caressing small, meaningless patterns with my fingertips.

“So. What exactly were you doing just staring like that?” I ask.

“I apologize. I got lost in thought.” Elias pauses. “You look peaceful when you sleep.”

I hum an acknowledgment, declining to comment on the second part of Elias’ answer. Even though some part of me is more flattered than I ought to be, all things considered. “Well, you can get lost in thought while cuddling instead,” I say, and Elias gives a low chuckle.

“You’re getting demanding.” Something wickedly amused stirs in his eyes. “You don’t need disciplining, do you now, dear?”

“I’m not sure about *need*, but I certainly wouldn’t mind it. Should I keep misbehaving?”

“Little minx,” he says, lightly pinching my thigh. “I understand why you get along so well with Caelan. Neither of you can resist being... was ‘sassy little shits’ the term he used?”

I laugh, then kiss Elias with genuine tenderness. “Sometimes that. But you know I’d obey you in a heartbeat if you were serious.”

“I hope so, love,” he murmurs. He kisses my forehead in return. “Go back to sleep. It’s not time for you to wake yet.”

I’m tempted to protest. I have an almost-naked Elias in bed with me, his legs tangling with mine, and I can’t deny that I’m interested.

But Elias is right. I only woke up momentarily, and my body wants to return to slumber. And of all the ways I could fall asleep, in Elias’ arms has got to be one of the best options I could imagine. His lips brush against mine, and I sigh as I let myself drift off again.

In the morning, Elias is gone.

It's no surprise as they told me upfront that even if they came to visit more often, they couldn't always stay very long. And I have things to do in the morning—classes or work, depending on what day it is.

There is certainly no guarantee I'd be able to get ready in any semblance of a decent time if I woke up to Elias or Caelan in bed with me. As pleasant as such a morning would be, all parties involved would end up flustered, rushed, and very late.

We'd tried it. Once.

So, it's by mutual agreement, and I'm not hurt by Elias leaving.

Still, it's a pleasant daydream to imagine a life where I'd get to wake up to both in bed with me. One where it's an ordinary enough occurrence that we don't feel the need to make the most of the situation by letting the sleepy morning kisses escalate into sleepy morning sex. Though, that would be nice, too, sometimes.

I spend the morning with my heart feeling fluttery and warm, grinning at nothing just because I got to spend time with Elias.

Chapter Eighteen

Several days later, I get home from a late studying shift in the library, sighing and letting my bag drop from my shoulder, only to be accosted by a widely grinning electric demon.

Elias is conscientious enough to let me know a day or so in advance if he has free time and asks if I'm available before coming over. Caelan, not so much. Sometimes he'll send a text in the morning, checking if I'm up for Netflix and chill that night, in either the literal sense or with the unspoken implication of the evening ending in sex. Both options are very much fine by me. While other times, I'll walk into my apartment and find Caelan simply waiting for me.

"Caelan!" I protest, mostly from the surprise. I don't mind him being here, *but...* "Warn someone when you're gonna jump out at them like that, jeez."

"Where's the fun in that?" he laughs, then greets me properly. "Heya, doll."

"Hey," I reply, then Caelan's arms slide around my shoulders, pulling me into a firm kiss, and I melt against him. I relax physically into his embrace, but my mind takes a moment to finally allow all the little worries and stresses of the day to fade away.

I've already studied tonight. I don't need to do any more. I can just let

Caelan kiss me and let his hands slide down my sides to my waist, fingers slipping beneath my shirt.

“Mmm...”

Caelan smiles. I can feel it in the way his lips press against mine. He curls his fingers into the fabric of my top and tugs on it. “Get changed,” he says.

I blink, breathless and off balance, needing a moment to catch up after his abrupt arrival and the sudden affection. “How come?”

“I wanna go out.”

“How out is out?”

Caelan shrugs and drapes himself over my shoulders. “Elias is working on sorting out a bunch of paperwork shit, and I’m bored. We could go to, like, a club or something. Dance. Have a few drinks. Whatever.”

I hum in consideration. Clubs, bars, those sorts of things have never really been my scene. Theoretically, it sounds fun. Music, dancing, and drinking, all of those separately, I have no problem with. It’s more the issue of the company. To let my hair down and enjoy the experience, I’d need to be there with people I’m close to, who I could relax with and have fun around. Meeting strangers holds no appeal to me, even though I know some would contest that’s part of the point. Different people enjoy different aspects, I suppose. In any case, that’s why I’ve never tended to go out to places like that. Because, really, who would I even go with?

Caelan. I’d go with Caelan, apparently.

Turning the idea over in my mind, it certainly holds some appeal. *I would like to dance with him and have a chance to just kick back.*

“I don’t want to be out all night, but... okay. I think I’d like that, if it’s with you.”

Caelan grins. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He kisses me again, something triumphant and heated in his eyes.

I laugh quietly as he finally pulls away. “Just, don’t make a scene or

anything?" I request.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Nothing that would get Elias pissed at us."

Caelan cackles at that. "Aww, but that's the most fun of all." He's only teasing, I can tell. I do believe he wouldn't go out of his way to cause trouble, but by his nature, Caelan tends to be chaotic.

"Behave," I say. "I have to live here and don't want any locals pissed off at me."

"That's fair. Promise I won't cause trouble for you."

I only shake my head, grinning to myself. I push Caelan back toward the bed, and he obligingly sprawls onto it, resting on his elbows as I straddle him. His expression is very interested.

I splay my hand out over his chest. "Stay here. I just need a quick shower, then I'll change, and we can go."

"Sounds fuckin' good to me," Caelan agrees. I clamber back off him, and he lays back with his hands behind his head to watch as I flit around the room.

I quickly toss my bag somewhere more sensible and rummage through my wardrobe for something to wear. Again, going out clubbing isn't really something I *do*. I don't have any outfits planned for occasions like this. I don't want to wear anything that might get me too much attention, but at the same time, I very much want *Caelan's* attention.

It's funny. I've never been one for making too much of an effort on my appearance before. I wear what I feel like. Often, it's just jeans and T-shirt, but I'm not above being dramatic and going for a low-key goth or punk aesthetic just because the look appeals to me personally. Now that I have someone I want to look nice for, I love the idea of dressing up for them.

"Dammit. What d'you think I should wear?" I ask Caelan. I'm not making any progress at all.

He shrugs. "Whatever you want to."

“Is this skirt too short?” I hold up a high-waisted, pleated skirt that doesn’t cover all that much of my thighs.

Caelan tilts his head, looking at the skirt, then at me. “Shan, why are you asking me? If you ain’t comfortable with it, it’s too short. I’m not gonna dictate that kinda shit for you.” He pauses. “You’d look hot in it, though.”

The flattery makes me grin. “Yeah, that’s why I want to wear it for you.” I put the skirt aside and continue rummaging for something to wear with it. “I just didn’t know if you’d, I don’t know, get jealous or whatever?”

Caelan snorts. “Nah, that’s more Elias’ thing. All possessive and that bullshit.”

I laugh. Caelan’s not wrong.

“He’s doing his best,” I defend.

“You know,” he says, and there’s something suddenly serious in Caelan’s tone. “He actually is.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve not seen him give a shit like this in... I dunno... fuckin’ forever. And oh my *God*, it’s annoying.” Caelan sits up on the bed. “You know he won’t shut up about you? I mean, no offense, doll, it’s not that that’s annoying. It’s the goddamn ‘oh, what if I’m accidentally manipulating her into liking us’ and ‘oh, but we’re not good people. Don’t you think she deserves better,’ and I’m like, shut the fuck up.”

I turn to stare at Caelan, butterflies suddenly churning in my stomach. “He really talks about that?”

Caelan huffs an irritated sigh. “And I *get* it. It’s not like I haven’t been worried about hurting you too. But overthinking achieves nothing. All we can do is our best. Elias keeps saying I live too much in the moment, but the moment is all we have and hell yeah, I’m gonna enjoy everything I can while I get the chance.”

“Is that why you came to see me tonight?”

“Maybe a little. I just want to spend time with you, that’s all.”

Suddenly, I'm tempted to forget about the club idea and just crawl into his lap and start kissing him. As brash as he can be, Caelan is oddly sweet, and I don't think he realizes it.

Swallowing down the small lump in my throat, I turn back to the wardrobe. Screw it. I don't care what anyone else thinks. I want to look hot for Caelan. If I'm with him, no one else will dare give me any unwanted attention anyway. Short skirt it is, and a lacy bodysuit top with a deep plunge that shows off rather a lot of cleavage.

Resting my knee on the bed, I lean over to kiss Caelan. Just briefly because I still feel ready to make out with him for an eternity, and we'll never get anywhere if I start that.

"I'm gonna shower," I inform him. "I'll be two minutes."

"'Kay," Caelan agrees before his grin morphs into something more lewd. "I'll be here thinking about you all wet and naked."

I choke on a laugh and teasingly flick his forehead. "I'd invite you to join me, but then it *definitely* wouldn't take only two minutes."

I press a quick peck to his lips and retreat to the bathroom because, dammit, now Caelan has me thinking about *him* all wet and naked, and I don't need to start getting all flustered already.

Two minutes may have been overambitious, but I still don't take all that long. After I dry off, I put on the outfit I picked out, throwing on extra eyeliner and mascara for good measure.

"Okay, ready," I announce as I return. I grab my purse and transfer a few essentials, including my wallet and phone, from my college bag, then slip my shoes on.

Caelan responds with a low whistle. "Very cute." He purrs approvingly. He stands and grips me by the hips, pulling me flush against him. "I can't wait to dance dirty with you."

My face flushes. Not so much at the promise, I've already figured that any dancing involving Caelan at a club would end with shameless grinding,

and, oh, I am very much down for that. It's more because I can already feel him, half-hard and pressing against me through his tight jeans.

This is going to be a very interesting evening.

We make our way out of the apartment building and onto the street, where I catch the guard on reception watching and raise my hand sheepishly in acknowledgment. By now, the staff here must have seen me leaving with Elias and Caelan on several separate occasions. I wonder what sort of conclusions they've come to.

"So, d'you know where any clubs are?" Caelan asks.

I shake my head at him, giggling. "Caelan, come on. Did you just show up here with no idea where you wanted to go beyond 'a club?'"

"Pretty much," he admits shamelessly.

"Well, it's not like I know any places, really. There's downtown. There are a ton of bars and clubs there. Or there are some places nearby. I walk past them on the way to the shops all the time, but I've never actually been in."

"It'll be less packed here than downtown, right?"

"I guess so. Probably."

"Let's stick 'round this area, then."

It's not downtown, but my apartment complex is very close to the main road running through one of the other moderately major areas of the city. It's big enough to have its own vibe, and has plenty of restaurants, bars, and eclectic stores. It's a little ironic, given I never go out.

Caelan hooks his arm around my waist. "So, where are we going?"

"Um... if we go past the coffee shop—"

"The one you and Elias hang out in all the time?"

"Mmm... that one. What, does he talk about that too?"

Caelan makes a noncommittal noise, one that sounds almost like an electrical crackle coming from him. "Ehh. It's come up."

I wonder what else they talk about, face heating up as I recall some of the nights when things took a distinctly less innocent turn. But then again, if they

talk about the sex they've had with me, I damn well want to hear about their sex life together too.

That's something for later consideration, maybe. Caelan seems more prone to gossiping than Elias, so I'll have to ask him at some point.

"Anyway," Caelan prompts. "Past the coffee shop?"

"Right. There's an entire line of places down that street. There's one club that always seems to have strobe lighting going and on the other side of the road, a bar with an outside fronting that seems popular. And one place that always has a giant inflatable display on the roof, I don't know what that's about. And a taco restaurant with a bar area as well. I've been to that one. Once."

He raises his eyebrows, somewhere between concern and amusement at my response. "You really *don't* get out much, huh?"

"I don't know why you don't believe me when I tell you these things."

" 'Cause you got the same sense of humor as Elias. You say things in that straight-ass deadpan way, but it's something so absurd or exaggerated that I have no idea if you're serious or not."

I laugh at the thought of Elias catching Caelan out like that. And I can just imagine the quietly self-satisfied, smug smile on Elias' face when he succeeds.

"Not going out much is hardly that absurd, but sure," I say.

Caelan makes a vaguely dismissive gesture. "In any case, I like the sound of the strobe light place."

It's as good as we're going to get, apparently, and it's getting cold standing around outside. I didn't really think about the weather when I picked this outfit.

Fortunately, it's not too far away. My nerves pick up again as we get closer. *I'm not one for clubbing. What do I even think I'm doing here? Dressed like this?* I take Caelan's hand for reassurance. He glances down at me with a bemused look but gives my hand a soft squeeze.

The place we picked is leaning toward the club side of things. It's not a big one as there's only one large room inside, visible through the glass windows that make up the full frontage of the building, and barriers create an extra outdoor area for people to spill into. It's busy but not heaving. The strobe lighting is in full force, and either the place is very smoky or they have a fog machine too. There's a rumbling beat of heavy bass that I can feel thrumming as we approach the bouncers.

I show my ID, and Caelan shows something of questionable legitimacy, but he's let in anyway. Maybe it's just another extension of his glamour.

"It sounds like it's gonna be pretty loud," I say to him. "Might be hard to talk."

Caelan shoots me a feral grin, something predatory in his eyes that makes my stomach flip. "I didn't come here to talk." His hand falls from mine, sliding over my ass and giving my thigh a soft squeeze instead.

A small pulse of heat shivers through me. "Oh. Okay."

"Drink?"

I nod. "Sounds good."

Leaning against the bar while Caelan orders for me, I take a moment to look around. It's unfamiliar territory but not unpleasant. Not with Caelan here. Alone, I know I'd feel out of place. I don't know any of the songs playing, and I don't have the confidence to dance by myself. Everyone else seems to be having fun, and I don't want to sit in a corner like a loser, bringing the vibe down. Because I know that's what would happen under normal circumstances. Or, previous circumstances, I suppose. When I didn't have an excitable, horny demon for a boyfriend.

He brings me my drink while chugging his own, and I raise an eyebrow. "Can you even get drunk?" I ask, voice raised over the music.

"Not really. Unfortunately. But I can kinda like..." he gestures vaguely, "... choose to let the alcohol have an effect if I want to."

That's genuinely interesting, and I wish I could ask more about it.

Something to do with demon physiology? But it's not really the place for such talk, even if I could hear Caelan's replies properly.

I drink my cocktail—something fruity and strong, but I don't know enough about alcohol to place it from that alone—at a more sensible pace. Caelan stands beside me, waiting patiently for me to be done but thrumming.

It's odd, yet somehow this sort of place suits him. Something about his power makes it feel like there's a low electrical hum around him. The rumble of the music accentuates it like Caelan could vibrate right along with the bass. For him, it's like sinking into a warm bath after a long day and just being immersed in something in a way that feels right, something that energizes him.

I wonder if that was what drew him to music in the first place.

After I finish my drink, Caelan pulls me out to the dance floor. Both of his hands are on my hips, the claws hidden beneath his glamour digging into me through my skirt. I wrap my arms around his neck and dance.

My body is pressed right up against Caelan's. I don't know how to dance, and this is a different kettle of fish compared to the ballroom dancing we tried at the gala. So, it's easier just to let Caelan move me in time to the music.

Not that there's a huge amount of movement involved. All I'm really doing is shifting along to the beat. Maybe making some arm movements if I can be bothered to take my hands off Caelan, but I'm enjoying the closeness far more than strictly dancing.

Caelan certainly doesn't take his hands off me.

He spins me in his arms, my back pressed into his chest and his hips grinding against my ass. I let my head fall back against him, and his mouth latches onto my exposed neck. I moan softly as he bites down on the sensitive flesh there, the sound lost beneath the blare of the music.

His hands move in time to the beat as they roam over my body, running from my thighs, up my sides, and over my stomach. After caressing my chest, his fingers slide inside the deep plunge of my top. I shiver, heat flooding my

face and core as he kneads my breasts until my nipples peak, and I whimper needily for him.

He's hard behind me, his length pressing into me through our clothes, the suggestive grind of it in the way he rolls his hips.

"Caelan," I groan.

I'm not sure whether I want him to stop or, oh God, please, keep going. This is definitely very far down on the dirty end of the dirty-dancing scale, and I'm trying so damn hard to remember we're still in public, but he makes it very difficult to think straight. It's so easy to get lost in the pounding bass, the smoky darkness of the club, and Caelan's touch all over me. He's careful to make sure he doesn't expose anything while groping me, but it's obvious what he's doing.

Reaching back, I grip his thigh in return, turning my head and tilting my chin up so he can claim my mouth. Grinding together in time to the music, his tongue doing utterly sinful things as it explores me.

Caelan moves from groping my breasts to reaching beneath my skirt. Just feeling up my thighs at first, then wandering dangerously close to rubbing between my legs.

Part of me wishes he would. My knees feel weak, and I'm so turned on. A little heady from the drink and even more so from the pulsing music and the atmosphere. My heart feels like it's pounding in my ears. Or maybe that's just a trick of the deep bass. I can't quite tell.

I'm wet for him already. And all it would take is for Caelan's fingers to shift the tiniest bit closer, and his knuckles would brush right against me. He'd be able to feel exactly what he's doing to me.

"Mmm, Caelan," I breathe. "I want to... take me home."

Caelan's eyes glow hungrily in the dim light. To anyone else, it would seem like just a reflection or a trick of the strobe lighting. I know the truth of it, though. "We've only been here, like, an hour. Are you not havin' fun?"

"Think I'm having too much fun," I mumble, and Caelan snorts.

He presses a line of wet kisses down the column of my throat, then smirks and moves around to press kisses even lower between my breasts. “Aw, but we’re just getting started.”

“I don’t want to get kicked out for public indecency,” I protest, finding it incredibly hard to concentrate when Caelan’s all over me like this.

Caelan laughs. “I’ve seen far worse happening here already. ‘Sides, you think I can’t keep them from noticing us if I want? Illusion stuff is more Elias’ area, but I can at least do that much.”

He does have a point in that regard, but I’m still not quite sure. A bit of exhibitionism is thrilling when it’s only Caelan or Elias watching, but the thought of doing anything in public twists my gut in a much less pleasant way, even if other people can’t see me.

Biting my lip, I shake my head. I don’t want to be a killjoy, and I don’t *want* to stop, but I can feel self-consciousness rearing its ugly head, and panic tightens in my chest. It’s better to be honest. Caelan will understand.

“Yellow,” I say with some reluctance. “Caelan, I-I can’t. Not with everyone around.”

Caelan’s hands immediately retreat from beneath my skirt and settle in a far more innocent hold on my waist. “Shit. Sorry, doll.” He pulls me close, but this time it’s nothing sexually charged. Just a hug and nothing more. “Wanna blow this joint?”

I bury my face against his shoulder and take a moment to breathe and reorient myself. “Yeah. I don’t want to stop everything, but just... let’s keep going somewhere more private?”

He grins. “You got it.”

He leads me back outside, and the cool evening air hits me like a sledgehammer after coming out of the packed heat of the club. It’s sobering and makes me grimace. *I really didn’t think about the weather and this stupid outfit.*

Caelan notices and wraps himself around me, rubbing my arms. While

Elias always tends to run a few degrees colder than a regular human, Caelan seems to run a few degrees warmer, and he lets me use some of his body heat to keep a little more comfortable on the way back.

We tumble into my apartment, and I lock the door behind us. Caelan is still looking at me with that desire in his eyes, but his smile is full of mischief and faked innocence.

“It’s still pretty early,” he comments idly. “We’ve got time to put on a movie or something.”

There is no way we’ll be able to sit through a movie and keep our hands off each other, and we both know it. But I laugh and oblige his game anyway. “Mmm... we could. What do you want to watch?”

Caelan shrugs.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I kick my shoes off before crawling to settle at the headboard. Given the lack of seating and that the television is directly in front of the bed, it’s the only sensible place to watch movies. My skirt rides up my thighs, but I don’t bother pulling it back down.

Caelan clambers after me, bracing his hands on either side of my waist and looming over me. He kisses me thoroughly for one brief, heated moment, before settling back to join me in a suitable watching position. He grazes his lips along my jawline. “You can pick whatever,” he says, and it takes me a second to remember he’s talking about the movie.

I really don’t care what we watch, and I doubt Caelan does either. It’s only a matter of how long we’ll keep up the charade before trying to get in each other’s pants.

Fumbling with the remote, I flick to the streaming service’s recommended section and select the first thing I see. Choosing something is too much effort.

With Caelan, I normally end up watching horror flicks. He finds them hilarious, and although I don’t get scared *that* easily, it’s nice to be able to burrow against his side when I start to feel unsettled. A cute excuse for more

contact is all it is. It's hard to be truly afraid of anything in some dumb movie when I have a genuine demon by my side. But that explains why all the movies on my recommended list are horrors of varying quality.

As I lean against Caelan's side, I sigh, and he drapes his arm over my shoulder. I honestly had no intention of paying any mind to the movie. My eyes are on the screen, but I'm much more acutely aware of Caelan—how firm he feels where I'm resting against him, the warmth of his skin, and the way his fingers absently shift against my shoulder.

I wish I'd stayed only paying attention to him.

The movie turns out to be on the lower end of the quality scale, a cheap gore-filled slasher, and it doesn't get any better as the story progresses.

I don't mind a bit of gore. I can hardly deny that I enjoy the sight of blood, and there's that thing I have for Caelan and his dagger and the things he does to me with that. So, it's not that I'm squeamish, but this is bad. It's enough to turn my stomach, and I really wish I'd looked before just hitting play on anything.

Wincing, I turn my face away and bury it into Caelan's shoulder. There's only so much I can handle of watching the murders, so many—a literal bloodbath—play out on screen, dragged out in visceral, sickening detail. I might not mind blood, but internal organs being slowly and sadistically ripped out is a little much. And the *screams*—

Normally, Caelan would be laughing, or at least rolling his eyes and drawling a complaint about how blatantly fake the effects are, but this time he's noticed my reaction and gone quiet.

He takes the remote from me and shuts the television off.

“Sorry,” I mumble against him. “That killed the mood, huh?” Well, maybe it wouldn't for him, he'd probably be into it, but still.

I glance up to find Caelan looking at me with an expression I can't read, something hard and blank. But he seems uncomfortable, almost, which is unusual for him.

It can't be the violence—he revels in that. So, what? Is it my reaction to it that's made him stop?

“Caelan?”

“I've done worse,” he announces.

I stare at him, that sickening sensation rising from my stomach to claw at my throat as I process that he's talking about what we saw in the movie. I don't want to think he would, it's utterly horrifying, but I know he's not lying.

“Why?” I ask softly. *Why would he do that? Why would he tell me?* It doesn't matter which question it is.

“Because I hated humans for a real long time.” There's no emotion in his voice. It's simply a statement of fact, sounding almost bored by it. He's not showing any feelings, and for Caelan, who is always animated in some way, negative or positive, that is the most terrifying thing of all.

I don't know what to say. I can't say anything. It's the same as the conversation I had with Elias, only *worse*. My blood runs cold, and I feel like it's the first time I've been honestly and truly scared of either of them. Too scared to even pull away from him, so I stay there in silence with my heart pounding and a monster's arm wrapped around me.

“It fuckin' sucks,” Caelan eventually elaborates, a low growl as anger starts to seep into his voice again. “Being this thing. Having something human tangled into the soul of a demon. Do you have any idea how *wrong* that is?”

He's still quiet, but there's something guttural and terrifying in his voice when he's finished, and I shrink back with my heart in my throat.

“Humans are never meant to cross dimensions or see the world the way we do. You know what happens? They go insane. There was this part of me constantly. *Fucking. Screaming.* Just 'cause of the very *curse* of existing and remembering—” He stops, panting, teeth bared, expression feral. He closes his eyes, and his mouth turns up into a snarl, but he pulls himself back

slightly.

“Caelan...” I begin softly. *Do I want to ask? Do I want to know?* Elias told me about his past. Maybe Caelan would too, and with how much they mean to me, it seems like it would be doing Caelan a disservice if I was too afraid to even hear his story.

“How did it happen?”

Caelan snorts, and for a moment I think he isn't going to answer. I wouldn't have been surprised and would have accepted him not wanting to talk about it.

“It was a game,” he suddenly announces. He makes a vague gesture toward the blank television. “Like that shit. It was a game. I was bored, and I'd fuck with people for the thrill of it. Their fear was so fucking addictive.” He breathes in heavily like he can taste it even now.

“I had a new idea one time. Borrowed the body of some guy. Not like it's hard. Kept his mind just aware enough so he could watch while I used him like a puppet to murder everyone he loved, soaking him in their blood and viscera. And I thought it was beautiful. He was fucking screaming, the rage, the pain, the utter *despair*. That kinda energy was like a goddamn high.”

God. My fingers clutch tighter at the bedcovers. *He's different now. Whatever happened changed him,* I remind myself. Because part of me is thinking far, far too late, *what the fuck have I gotten myself involved in? What kind of monster did I fall in love with?*

I guess it's like Elias said when he was talking about their kind. Some of them only came with malicious intentions. Caelan was one of those.

“I gave the bastard a little leeway in the end. Could feel him fighting sooo hard to get back control. It was fuckin' hilarious.”

Caelan says it, but there is none of the sadistic amusement in his voice I would usually expect. Perhaps it's more a statement of how it felt at the time. I get the impression he doesn't feel quite the same anymore.

“I wanted to see what he would do.” Caelan shrugs. “Tried to kill himself,

turns out. He was just stabbing away, jamming the same massive ass carving knife I'd had him kill everyone else with into his abdomen over and over, frantic as all shit. Thought that was funny as fuck too."

Although he's keeping his voice impassive, his accent is creeping in, and he's dropping even more swear words than usual. He's obviously upset.

"Don't ever fucking tell Elias I said this," Caelan says, changing tact. He looks directly at me, instead of avoiding my gaze as he's otherwise been doing this whole time, and I nod. "I was too cocky," he admits. "The damn prick is right. Sometimes my arrogance gets the better of me. And I've never hated any fact more in my fucking existence. The fact is, I was *stupid*."

"How so?"

"I stayed right there, in his body, reveling in all of it. 'Cause, like, I know damn well how long it takes a human to die. I'd just drop the body like a sack of shit right before the final moment, yeah? Chasing that high of being right there as he died in abject misery and suffering."

Caelan pauses, his face like thunder. "Yeah. I didn't get out. Fucker pierced his heart at some point. I was too giddy and cocky and busy goading him that I didn't even *notice*... whatever. And the thing is, he was powerful too. For a human, I mean. It drew me to him in the first place, I wanted to knock him down a few pegs. He was powerful in the way some of your kind are more attuned to other planes and can play with, like, *magical* energies or whatever bullshit terminology they wanna use. Like, he wasn't a sorcerer or nothing. But back in days when y'all did that shit, he could've been. You know?"

I nod, not sure I understand, but grasping the basic sentiment.

"I can't even tell you why. And that's killed me for years. Jus' a perfect storm of absolute bullshit circumstances. I was still in the body when it died. It caught me off guard. All that rage and torment and despair makes for a powerful curse. Messy, not even intentional, it wouldn't normally touch a creature like me, but his last driving desire was to bring me down with him

and keep me sealed away so I couldn't do what I did to him to anyone else." He laughs bitterly. "Don't think it worked out like he intended, but sure as *shit* fucked me over."

"So, you were trapped in his human form?" I look him up and down. "Am I having sex with a *corpse*?"

That question startles and bemuses Caelan enough to get him to laugh more genuinely. "Nah, doll. I'm still me, not just piloting that sack of shit around."

"But the scars..."

Bad question. I've never seen Caelan shut down so fast. "Those aren't what *he* did. Don't you worry your pretty head about that."

I suppose that makes sense. Caelan said the human had stabbed himself in the abdomen, while his scars are more violent slashes than inward stabs. I stop that train of thought. It makes my heart ache to think of what else must have happened to Caelan to give him those.

"You know what he did leave me?" Caelan growls. "That fucking fragment of his soul, or whatever it was that got all tangled up and fused into mine... it remembers. I had to... I had to, have to, *fucking*—" He doesn't know how to express it, and he snarls in frustration.

"Everything I fucking did! And he made me *feel it!* Demons don't feel. I didn't feel. I fed off that shit. But there was this filthy, disgusting thing in me... part of me, *me*... that experienced that agony from the human perspective and you can never, ever, ever understand how abhorrent that is..." He pauses.

'I'm sorry' feels like such a hollow sentiment in the wake of all his pain and rage and sorrow. I swallow. "What did you do?"

"I hated everything about humans more than ever. About... myself. And I wanted to make them pay, as if their pain would get rid of mine. For a long, long time, I didn't stop. Those things I did to him. I did worse again in revenge. Tell me, Shannon, do you still love me after that?"

“Caelan...” I squeeze my eyes and shake my head. “You’re not like that now, though. Right? People change.”

He snorts, a bitter, unpleasant sound. “You think so?”

“Yes. I’m... I’m not thrilled about your past, not going to lie, but I do love you. I love who you are now, the version of you I know. And that’s what matters, isn’t it?”

“I could tear you to pieces.”

“But you know I trust that you won’t,” I say firmly, praying my trust isn’t misplaced. I don’t think it is. He’s talked like this before, when we did our knife play scene that first time, and that turned out fine. *But when he’s acting like this, he is... he is still a demon.*

“You and Elias are the same. Stupid damn idiots willing to give me a chance.”

I wonder how much prying is wise, but I end up asking anyway, just to try to steer the conversation into safer waters. “What did Elias do?”

Caelan pauses a moment. “He was the one to snap me out of it. Having someone else like me around made things easier.”

I stay quiet a moment, my pulse still thudding too loud in my ears. Tentatively, I take Caelan’s hand. “I’m glad he did.”

“It’s not easy. Ain’t ever fuckin’ *easy*. But it’s... whatever.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? You’re sorry for me being a monster?”

“You said you hated yourself too. I know how much that sucks.”

Caelan gives me a sidelong glance, eyebrows furrowed in disbelief. “All the things you could’ve picked out from that rant, and you’re going with that? Gonna try and humanize the shit I did? Sometimes a demon is just a demon, doll.”

“But you’re not just a demon anymore. Even if you despised it so much at first, you’re a better person now.”

He grunts. “Not just a demon, sure. Part human, too, and I would’ve

carved that part right outta me if I could. I tried.”

“What?”

“Those scars you were asking about? Well, that’s how. No one and nothing else has ever had the damn power to leave lasting damage on a creature like me.”

My eyes widen, and I suddenly feel very small and stupid. *To think I made a game of kissing along the scars, enjoying the look of them. To find out he’d done that to himself—*

“Jesus Christ, Caelan.”

He seems to think he’s said too much, because he turns away and gets off the bed as if to leave. I immediately lean after him and grab his wrist.

“Wait! You don’t have to go.”

“Yeah, I should, though.”

“I don’t like the idea of you being alone.”

Caelan gives me a confused look, then laughs. It’s not an overly pleasant sound. “Sweetheart, you’re cute, but that was forever ago. I just need to go stab something inanimate, then maybe have Elias choke me out and fuck me until I can’t even scream anymore. Ya feel?”

“Um... I guess.”

He finally softens a little, glancing away. He can still never quite apologize directly to my face. “Sorry for getting heavy on you or whatever. Didn’t mean to ruin your night.”

“It’s okay,” I say, and I realize it is. “You freaked me out, but I would rather have you talk to me than just be flippant and hide your feelings all the time. It’s all right, I promise.”

He takes my head between his hands, fingers stroking through my hair. For one moment, an expression that’s almost anguished flashes across his face. “We’re gonna end up hurting you for real someday,” he mutters, then he kisses me. It’s tender despite the tightness of his grip, despite the little electrical crackles shuddering through him that are always a sure sign his

emotions are running high.

“Next date will be better for you, I promise,” Caelan says. I don’t get a chance to reply. He kisses me again, then vanishes almost immediately, slipping into the abyss where I can’t follow.

I spend the rest of the night staring at the ceiling, unsettled thoughts racing too fast to allow me to drift off. It’s the early hours of the morning by the time I roll over and pick up my phone again. I send a text to Caelan, typing out nothing more than *I love you*, but that’s enough closure for me to finally get to sleep.

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Chapter Nineteen

Caelan was right about one thing. The next date is better. As far as I'm concerned, any date with them is good. Even if things do get serious, I don't *mind* that. That I'm getting closer to them, that they're opening up to me the way I opened up to them, is something I treasure, even if there is a lot of thorny shit involved. Everyone has baggage, flaws, and darkness in them. They just have a lot more than most.

Still, there's more than enough sweetness to even it all out. *And spice*. I grin to myself at that thought.

Sometimes we don't even go out and do anything, we just enjoy each other's presence while we're busy with our own things. I feel a little bad about that. Elias brings his laptop and whatever he's working on. Sometimes lyrics, sometimes organizational things, negotiating contracts and the like, and sits in bed beside me, typing away.

I'm certain the setting is a massive step down from how he usually does his work. I picture him more in an office, all imposing dark wood furniture and a black leather chair. I'd offered him the use of my desk, but he'd only laughed.

So, he sits on my bed with his work, and I sit next to him with my textbook and school notes, occasionally leaning against his shoulder just to enjoy him being there. Caelan perches on the end of the bed with his guitar,

playing new riffs he's working on for future songs.

He's quiet for once, focused like that, eyes lowered as he strums the notes. Every time I look over it strikes me how gorgeous he is.

It's quiet and comforting and sickeningly domestic.

On one such evening a couple of weeks later, Elias draws my attention by kissing the top of my head. "Do you think you would be able to get the weekend after next off work?" he asks.

I look away from my notes to blink at him. "How come?"

"I think I'd rather like to kidnap you for the weekend."

That makes me laugh. "I know you're just being facetious, but that could be entirely literal coming from you." I grin and push my textbook aside, sliding my arms around Elias' neck. "I'd rather like to be kidnapped."

"You guys are sickening," Caelan comments.

"You're welcome to kidnap me and do horribly perverted things to me any day as well."

Caelan looks at me for a long moment, smirking. "Yeah? Are you into that kind of role-play or something? 'Cause I'm sure that could be arranged."

This was not at all how I expected this conversation to go. The idea of role-playing with them isn't something I've considered before, but the idea is interesting, no doubt about that. I turn it over in my head, eyes glazing.

Elias chuckles, then guides my thoughts back to where they should be by hooking a finger beneath my jaw and tilting my chin up to look at him. "Some other time, perhaps. I was actually intending to ask you out, as it will be six months since we first met you. I thought it would be nice to go somewhere."

"Oh."

Six months? It feels like I've known them much longer, yet at the same time as though this whole thing is still so much newer than that.

"I understand you don't wish to be spoiled constantly, but I'm certain such an occasion as this could be considered an exception?"

I nod. I might feel guilty about him regularly spending too much on me, but I do *like* it when he takes us to fancy restaurants and such places. Like it a lot. “I’ll allow it,” I tease.

“And we’d like to have you for the entire weekend. Like the gala, we’ll collect you on Friday and spend the night together. Then I have reservations for a restaurant on Saturday evening. We’ll bring you back whenever you’d like to return home on Sunday. Don’t worry about any transportation for yourself.”

Another whole weekend with them. A small, trembling shard of anticipation curls in my gut at the thought. I can’t wait. As wonderful as it is to have them as part of my everyday life, to see them in the evenings or whenever I have time around work and classes, I adore the opportunity to get utterly lost in their lives even more.

“That sounds perfect.” I give Elias a wry smile. “And I guess you’re organizing somewhere to stay too?”

He doesn’t immediately answer that. Oddly, he looks to Caelan, who returns his glance with a raise of his eyebrows and an unreadable smirk.

“Everything is taken care of,” is all Elias says.

I look to Caelan too, hoping to find some explanation for the strange, unspoken exchange, but there’s nothing to be gleaned from him. That grin of his could mean anything.

“Well, almost everything,” I say, sighing. “I already know I have work shifts.”

“Can you exchange them or ask for the time off?” Caelan asks. He has the same vested interest in making sure I can come, after all.

My brows knit and I frown sourly. “Definitely couldn’t get the time off. I already took an entire weekend for the gala.”

Elias frowns. “That was almost three months ago.”

“I’m an entry-level lab assistant. I don’t exactly get much in the way of holiday benefits.”

“I could always have a word with your manager,” he offers with poison sweetness, and I immediately laugh.

“No! How many times? I don’t want you to threaten people because of me,” I say. But despite my words, and although I probably should be serious about such a request, I’m laughing. It’s flattering that they’d be so overprotective and look out for me.

“Please.” Elias scoffs. He caresses his thumb over my cheekbone and tenderly cups my face in his hand, leveling me with a smirk that’s pure charm and seduction. It still leaves me flustered every time. “Surely, you remember...” he purrs, leaning in close enough I can feel his breath ghosting against my lips, “... that I can be very persuasive.”

I splutter for a moment, face flushing. All it takes is for him to turn up the charm, and I’m weak for him in seconds. “I... I sure hope you’re not gonna talk like that to my manager,” I eventually manage.

The delivery isn’t the strongest, given my heart is skipping in my chest and I’m stumbling over my words, but it’s enough to get Elias to lean back and raise his eyebrows in bemusement. And as for Caelan—Caelan absolutely cracks up over it.

“She got ya on that one, Elias!” He cackles. “Imagine if it’s some crusty ass old dude and you’re gonna be all seductive to *that*...” He trails off into a hiccup of mirth.

“That is not what I was implying, Caelan. You do realize ‘charm’ can merely be polite reasoning and not flirtatious?”

“Uh, do *you* realize that? ’Cause I ain’t seen anything else from you ever.”

I giggle at their responses, especially Caelan’s. His laugh is infectious. “Well, anyway. *I’ll* ask, maybe see if I can switch for some extra shifts during the week. It’ll be worth it for whatever time I can get with you.”

“Let us know what you can arrange,” Elias says calmly. Then, just as calmly, he picks up one of my pillows and throws it viciously at Caelan.

Caelan takes it full to the face and only laughs harder.

Despite apparently resolving the issue with the agreement that neither of them would get involved, I wonder if Elias did somehow speak to my manager. It probably wasn't Caelan—the trauma would be more obvious. But when I ask during my next shift, everyone seems unusually obliging to let me shuffle my hours around.

Still, it's not something worth worrying over. I'm just glad to be able to get the time free. Because that means I have the whole weekend to spend with Elias and Caelan. There's a Friday morning class I can't do anything about, but I text them to let them know they can pick me up in the afternoon.

That's still a week away, and I see them both separately before then. But neither are particularly forthcoming on any details. I know we'll be going out to a restaurant on Saturday night, and they say there are no plans beyond that other than enjoying the time together, but they won't tell me where we're going.

The matter is only confused further by the fact that they're driving when they come to collect me.

I hug them both, and they kiss me until I'm giggling and breathless in return. Caelan takes my bag as I lock the apartment up behind me, and Elias leads us to where he's parked.

“Okay, stupid question time,” I say as I slide into the back seat with Caelan. Elias is driving, as usual. I wonder if he just doesn't trust Caelan behind the wheel of a fast-moving two-ton vehicle. “Why on earth are we driving?”

There must be a reason. Elias places a high value on efficiency, and he wouldn't be wasting time and effort on driving when he could just carry me through the abyss, not unless there was some purpose to it. Like when he took me specifically out on a scenic drive. We're over the whole thing about him not wanting me in between dimensions now, so that can't be it.

I catch them sharing that same glance again. They're up to something or

keeping something from me, and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

It is our anniversary, I suppose. Just six months, so not exactly significant, but maybe they have a surprise planned. That's probably all it is.

So, I try to not worry too much about it. Whatever they're up to, I'll find out when they are ready.

Elias gives Caelan a noncommittal look, tilting his head in a silent gesture of 'do as you will' and Caelan shrugs.

"Figured you should see what the drive's like," he explains.

"Um... why?"

Another pause, another shrug. "Eh. It'll make sense when we get there."

I should have seen that one coming. They have been cagey about it this whole time, and they're not going to spill their secrets now we're right on the cusp.

Even though I spend most of the time chatting freely with them, there's a part of me that remains distracted. I watch out the window far more than I normally would, keeping track of the time and trying to figure out exactly where we're going.

We head out of the city and toward LA. There's a moment where I wonder if that's where we're going, but we turn off the highway long before that. Then Elias drives us into a more residential area, somewhere generically upper class and suburban-looking, and my confusion increases exponentially. *They live in the city, don't they?* Close to each other, but with separate places, although it's a moot point, given they stay with each other most of the time regardless. The space is there if they need it. That's what they've always said anyway.

We travel all the way to the outskirts, where the houses are larger and even further apart— private. Elias pulls to a stop outside a large brick manor. Maybe a manor. It's either that or a large house. I'm not sure exactly where the boundary lies.

"What is this place? An Airbnb or something?"

“Not exactly,” Elias says smoothly.

He walks to the door, unlocking it with a key of his own, and I grab my bag from the trunk, trailing after him, with Caelan bringing up the rear. Caelan has that smug grin on his face, hands in his jeans pockets as he leans against the doorway and watches me.

I’m starting to have suspicions, and a heavy weight of guilt settles in my stomach. The feeling gets worse as I step inside, and my eyes go wide. There’s a living room immediately to the left, and *opulent* is the only word I can think of. The high ceiling reaches all the way to the second story, a mezzanine balcony overlooking the room from upstairs. The living room alone is twice the size of my apartment. The wooden floors are covered with an expansive rug in the center, dark leather sofas, a matching mahogany coffee table, a piano in the corner, and an honest-to-God fireplace. To the right is an open-plan kitchen with marble counters arranged around a central island. The house expands with what looks like a dining room beyond the kitchen and a set of stairs leading upstairs and down.

“Elias,” I say quietly. “Please tell me you didn’t buy this.”

“Would it be a problem if we had?”

The casual lack of denial tells me enough. “You bought a house!”

“Do you not like it, darling?”

I bite my lip. I can’t assume that their buying it had anything to do with me. It seems almost narcissistic to give myself that much credit.

Maybe they just wanted to move or a change of pace. I don’t dictate their lives to that degree. Maybe it’s just coincidence that this place is far closer to where I live in San Diego, like a halfway point between the three of us.

A house, though.

“It’s just... a lot,” I say weakly. “Is this for you to live in?”

“When we’re here, yes. Obviously, we’ll be away when touring requires and such like, but this is a far more pleasant environment than LA. It’s not as though commuting distance is a concern of ours.”

“And it’d be nice to have somewhere you can come stay with us,” Caelan adds.

I take a deep breath and let the knot in my stomach loosen. I don’t want to let my misplaced guilt ruin this moment for me.

“It does look lovely,” I admit. “I get the feeling you chose this, though, Elias.”

He huffs a laugh. “Caelan has very few preferences. I have many.”

“You’re both going to live here? Together?”

“Yes, that is the intention.”

There’s a heavy pause and Elias looks like he wants to say more. He thinks better of it and gestures further into the house. “Why don’t we show you around?”

“Yeah, and there’s a room for you if you like. I mean. The bed in the master bedroom is big enough for all of us.” Caelan grins. “That was an essential requirement, but there’s more rooms than we can use. Elias goes overboard with everything, so there’s one you can have on your own, if you’d like. Hell knows I need some damn space to get away from this overbearing edgelord sometimes.”

I giggle. Caelan means it affectionately, but he’s right. I’m introverted enough that, as much as I love them, some space of my own would be a welcome necessity if I’m to be here for any amount of time.

“All right,” I agree. “I’d like to see the place, at least.”

Now that some of the shock has worn off, I can’t deny there’s a thrill to it. That this is theirs, that I can come and stay with them in a place that’s something like a shared home for them. And that it’s so gorgeous. Overkill, maybe, but stunning. It’s the sort of place I have only ever dreamed of.

Elias rests his hand at the small of my back and guides me upstairs. They show me my room first to let me dump my stuff there. That’s what they refer to it as, not just a guest room or a place I can stay, but *my* room.

Two windows overlook the expansive garden. There’s a double bed

beneath them and an armchair across from it. In one corner, there is a fireplace, and in the other is a door leading to an ensuite. Most curious of all is a small stairwell, tucked away at the back of the bedroom, that leads down into well-lit study with a sloped roof, a desk, and plenty of shelving already in place.

“Is it sufficient for you?” Elias asks, and I shake my head with a wry smile.

“You’ve seen where I live, you know I’m not that fussy. This is way more than I need.”

I smile for them, but butterflies are churning in my stomach, and I’m not even sure why. I turn away to stare out the window, hiding my face from them.

Elias notices the way I’m pulling back and touches my arm. “Are you certain?”

“Maybe it’s... too much,” I admit quietly. “It’s lovely, and it’s not that I don’t appreciate it, but I don’t deserve to stay somewhere like this with you.”

Caelan joins me, slinging a reassuring arm around my shoulders. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m gonna be here too, and if a trash animal like me is allowed to hang out here, you sure can. It just looks intimidating ’cause it’s brand new, and we haven’t made a home of it yet. You and me, we’ll mess the place up and make it more livable, yeah?”

Elias grunts. “Mess up your own room,” he says.

I laugh, more out of obligation than truly being at ease, but Caelan does make me feel more comfortable about the whole thing. Maybe I just need time to get used to the idea. That’s all it is. It’s a massive change compared to my apartment. Any change this big is going to feel a little surreal at first. *Besides, it’s just for the weekend, right?* It’s not so much different from staying at a fancy hotel with them, and I’ve done that before.

“All right,” Caelan says impatiently, something wicked in his eyes. “Come see the master bedroom now.”

That's probably where I will spend the most time with them, I imagine, and *that* is something I can be comfortable with.

Caelan wasn't exaggerating when he said the bed was big enough for all of us. I gape at it as he ushers me into the room. I didn't even know beds came that large. It must be at least the size of two queens together.

How does anyone even get sheets and covers big enough to match that?

"Wow."

"Told you it'd fit all of us," Caelan grins.

"No kidding."

"We just want to make sure you can be comfortable here," Elias says.

"And by comfortable, he means we want to make sure there's enough room for fucking and cuddling."

"Caelan."

I do laugh at that, more genuinely. "Well, that's definitely something I can get behind."

I yelp as Caelan picks me up by the waist and tosses me onto the bed, then pounces on top of me. "Is it comfy enough?" he asks, smirking like an absolute beast.

"Very comfy." I giggle, wriggling beneath him. *It is* comfy. I'm being completely honest about that. "Has a good bounce when you throw me onto it," I note with a grin.

"That's important in a bed," Caelan agrees as his hands find my wrists and pin me down to the covers. There's a long moment when he simply hovers close, and my heart skips with anticipation. Then his lips are on mine, and I moan softly, eyes fluttering shut.

The mattress dips with Elias' weight as he joins us. Unfortunately, it's only to grab Caelan by the scruff of the neck and pull him off me.

"Can we at least finish the house tour first?" He sighs. When he catches me grinning, he swoops down to kiss the smirk off my face.

The two of them let me up and, a little flustered but far more at ease, I

slide off the bed and brush myself down. I'm still smiling as I take the opportunity to look around properly.

The rest of the room is standard—closet, mirror, armchair, and a door leading to another ensuite for this room as well. In the corner, on top of a low dresser, is an oversized panda plush that I immediately recognize as the one I won in Santa Monica.

Elias kept it and thought of it enough to bring it here, which makes me melt.

Elias leads, showing me around the rest of the house. Upstairs are another two bedrooms, one each for Elias and Caelan. The house is still very much a new acquisition for them, to the point where they've barely personalized their rooms yet, apart from the fact that somehow Caelan's managed to leave his a mess already. He leans over and conspiratorially admits he just pulled the covers off and threw them on the floor because the pristine perfection was getting on his nerves. And that he plans to paint the walls black, to which Elias winces but otherwise says nothing.

Downstairs, I've already seen the kitchen and living room, but there's also a study for Elias, the dining area I'd caught a glimpse of, and a rec room with a television, games system, and a collection of mainly Caelan's musical instruments—a few guitars, a drum kit, and the like.

"And now the best bit," Caelan announces as we approach the next flight of stairs down.

"The basement?" I question doubtfully.

"Just because this is here does not mean you need to make use of it personally," Elias assures me, which only increases my bewilderment.

Two demons are dragging me down to the basement. That's not a setup for murder at all. They wouldn't, of course, but the irony of the situation amuses me.

The truth of the matter catches me off guard, even though, on reflection, I don't know why I didn't expect something like this.

“Holy *shit*,” I blurt out. “You have a kinky sex dungeon in your basement?”

Caelan snorts a laugh, clearly finding the reaction adorable.

I ignore him for the time being, still too thrown to pay attention to either of them. But not in a bad way.

It’s not at all the typical dark, sleazy sex dungeon I might have imagined. It’s as light and airy as the rest of the house—white walls and marble floors, with more rugs to soften the starkness of it, decorative plants in a few places, and well-lit by multiple sconces. Minimalist, maybe, but pleasant. And filled with kink furniture.

There’s a seemingly ordinary chair, apart from the cuffs at the feet and armrests, and what I figure is some kind of padded spanking bench. But the bed is the centerpiece.

It’s a massive thing with a dark wooden frame, and the more I stare at it, the more potential uses reveal themselves. There are bars in the place of a headboard, with a few interestingly placed circles and notches in the metal. Cuffs and rings are built into the frame around the bottom of the bed. And where the frame extends up to form a sturdy canopy above the bed, there are also suspension hooks built into it.

The bed is raised high, with bars around the space underneath to form a cage. It’s meant to be used for that purpose because there’s a lockable door leading in.

Elias notices me staring and mistakes my stunned silence for reluctance. “Don’t worry. The cage is only for Caelan if he misbehaves.”

“*Hey.*”

I giggle quietly, but I’m more interested in the room. I make my way further in, and there are thin wooden panels on one of the far walls, studded with pegs and various implements hanging from them—floggers, paddles, riding crops, a whip. Ropes and chains are curled neatly and ready for use. There’s a dresser too, and I am utterly intrigued by what that might hold, but

perhaps that's a little far to go rummaging without permission.

“As I say, darling, there is absolutely no pressure for you to use anything —”

“I want to,” I interrupt immediately. I turn to Elias and Caelan, a slow, wide grin spreading over my face. “Are you kidding? This is... I mean, give me a sec to get my head around everything, but *damn*.”

“That's a good damn, right?” Caelan asks.

“Caelan, I've already let you fuck me up with a knife. You know I'm good for some kinky shit.”

Beyond our nights together at the gala, we haven't had much of an opportunity to explore the kinks we spent so long talking about. My apartment isn't exactly set up for that sort of thing, and I have to be constantly mindful of the neighbors' hearing. Beyond a bit more bondage and some general roughness, which, frankly, just comes with the territory for them, none of the sex we've had since I'd exactly call kinky.

But *this*. The possibilities are endless.

And there's no one around to hear me scream.

I look at the ropes, cuffs, and toys, and something in me squirms in delight. Everything I've ever wanted to try is now at my fingertips.

When I look back at them again, Elias and Caelan are staring at me with a heat in their eyes that makes my knees weak. Caelan's expression is downright predatory, like he wants to shove me back against the bed and have his way with me right now. Elias is more composed, but he's wearing that quiet, calculating look that makes me feel like he's carefully planning all the things they could do with me here.

“Well,” he says smoothly, yet still with a touch of roughness underlying his tone. “Perhaps we can agree on something to try later. For now, why don't we head back upstairs?”

I brush my lips against Elias'. “I'm gonna hold you to that,” I inform him.

“Oh, this is gonna be fun,” Caelan comments.

Even as we return upstairs, I can't stop thinking about that goddamn basement room. We agree that food is something we should sort out, more for my benefit than theirs, and end up deciding to order Chinese delivery.

We settle into the living room, and I end up huddled on the sofa next to Elias while Caelan leans against me with his legs hanging over the armrest. We eat, talk, and laugh, while half my mind is still downstairs.

Internally, I sigh to myself. It's only been two goddamn weeks. The last few dates with Elias and Caelan haven't given rise to a chance to be intimate with them. Circumstances, neighbors, and time denied us that pleasure. But two weeks is not that long, considering how long I've gone without seeing them before and how long I went with no relationship at all before meeting them.

So, there's no reason I should be so worked up. *Dammit. There isn't really any way to put it that isn't crude. I'm fucking horny. They're right there, so close, teasing me with constant, casual touches, and they have a goddamn sex dungeon in the basement, and I'm so into it.*

I want them.

I bite my lip, considering it as I watch Caelan animatedly ramble about something and Elias smirk quietly, fondly, in silent response. I love them. I trust them. And maybe they make me feel confident enough to be bold about my desires.

I give Caelan a soft shove to get him off me, then a peck on the cheek as an apology, grinning at his mildly offended expression. Like he's a cat I dared to shift from its favorite spot. "I'm gonna just go get changed quickly," I say by way of explanation.

The unspoken assumption is that I mean into pajamas. It's that time of late evening when getting comfortable, cozy, and ready for bed is an acceptable act. I don't correct them.

In my bag upstairs, I have the lingerie I packed. It's not the *nicest* lingerie, the gorgeous stuff is beyond my price range, but I have the basics. I

might have bought some of it for an occasion just like this. I already owned the black lacy panties and matching black balcony bra that covers only half of my breasts. The garter belt and stockings are a new set I bought to match them better.

I still feel mildly self-conscious about being quite so forward, so I throw a short, silk nightie, perhaps negligee would be a more accurate term, over the top.

Silently, I make my way back downstairs to where Elias and Caelan are waiting. They're still engaged in conversation. Caelan says something snarky, and Elias laughs, and the casual comfort and intimacy between them seems almost too good to interrupt.

My fingers toy with the hem of the nightie. It's only just long enough to cover my panties, and very much leaves the garters visible. For a moment, I internally debate how good of an idea this is, but then Elias glances over and catches sight of me, and the immediate lust in his eyes is the most gratifying thing I could have imagined.

Caelan notices the way Elias has suddenly tensed and peers over as well. His eyebrows raise, and he lets out a low whistle. "Damn, doll."

Elias says nothing. He only gestures me forward with an abrupt motion of his hand, tapping on his knee. I go to him, anticipation curling in my gut as I climb onto his lap.

"So, Shannon. Is this how you feel about it?" Elias asks, something that's almost a growl in his voice. His hands slide along my thighs, settling on my hips and bunching up the silk fabric to half-expose the lingerie beneath. Just that much is enough to make me shiver.

"Take me downstairs," I request softly. "Please, Sir."

Sitting in his lap like this, I can feel exactly how he's reacting. How quickly he's hardening. The darkness and desire in his gaze as he drinks me in, and I moan when Elias roughly claims my mouth.

Caelan, never content to be left out, runs his clawed nails down my spine

and leans in to kiss the side of my neck. Then he grazes his teeth, nipping and sucking at the sensitive flesh until I'm certain he's going to leave hickeys.

"And what would you have us do with you?" Elias asks, when he finally breaks away.

I tilt my head, my breath catching as Caelan licks over the marks he's left, looking up at me with a dark, amused curiosity in his eyes. *What do I want them to do?*

"Anything. Anything you want, I'm yours to use. Right?"

Elias chuckles lowly. "You are sweet," he says, a dark, appreciative purr in his voice. The way his grip on me tightens harshly for just a moment is a testament to his temptation to take me up on that offer. "Perhaps someday, when we know your limits better. But for now, and especially for your first time exploring the dungeon, I think it would be best if we mutually agreed, don't you?"

"I don't even know where to start," I admit.

"What d'you like most that we've done to you so far?" Caelan suggests.

I laugh. "Um... everything? But I enjoy feeling powerless, letting you completely dominate me. When you pin me down or tie me up."

Elias and Caelan share a glance.

"That can certainly be arranged," Elias says. His fingers slide higher, tracing over the lace of the garter belt around my waist, then further up until he finds my bra. He's dragging the nightie up as he does so, and, with a huff of irritation at the fabric getting in the way, he eventually takes hold of it and pulls it off entirely.

"Better," he murmurs. His eyes roam hungrily over the newly exposed flesh, wrapped so prettily for them, and I flush beneath the heat of his gaze. "So gorgeous for us already... just imagine how beautiful a picture you would make all bound up in rope as well."

They've tied me up before, but I get the feeling Elias means something a little more involved than what I've experienced thus far. I shiver excitedly.

“I’d like that.”

“All tied up and helpless for us to toy with,” Caelan adds wickedly, and yeah, I’d *definitely* like that.

Elias holds up one finger in a gesture for me to remain still. I do so, watching curiously as he draws smoke-like shadows from the air and wraps them around his fingers. He takes hold of my collar, and as the shadows solidify into something tangible, I realize why.

He’s added a leash to it.

Elias gives me another kiss, brief but no less heated, then taps me on the thigh in a silent command to get up and follow him.

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Chapter Twenty

Elias leads me downstairs by the leash, him in his full suit a stark contrast to me in nothing but my lacy lingerie. The vulnerability and submissive nature of my position make my heart race. I want to submit to them. I want to be theirs.

The dungeon's marble floor is cool beneath my feet. Elias guides me to the bed, then hands the leash to Caelan.

"Why don't you keep her entertained while I sort out the ropes?" he suggests, and Caelan is eager to comply.

Caelan takes the leash and curls it around his hand, yanking me toward him. The collar tightens just momentarily, enough to make me gasp, then moan softly in response.

"Fuck, Shannon," he mutters roughly. He sits on the edge of the bed and drags me with him, and this time it's his lap I end up sitting in. "You have no idea the things I want to do to you when you come to us willingly looking like that. You're just *begging* for it."

"Begging for what?" I ask breathlessly.

Caelan resumes his attack on my throat, teeth grazing against my pulse point. "Can I cut you again?" he asks. "You're so damn pretty. I need you messed up. I need you to *bleed* for me." There's a growl in his voice by the end of the sentence, and it sends a thrill through me. I squirm in his lap.

“Yeah.” I gasp. “Yeah, just. Shallow, like before?”

Caelan grins. “Don’t worry, I ain’t planning to scar you up this time. But *fuck*. I’mma let Elias tie you up, like a gorgeous gift just for us, and when you can’t move, and you can’t resist, I want...” He trails off and leans in, and I can feel the warmth of his breath against my lips. “I want to take my time with you. I want to see you *squirm* for me. Slowly trail my knife over that pretty skin, split you open, and make you *beg*.”

“Oh, God.” I groan. Heat is pulsing in my core from the promise alone. “*Please*, Caelan.”

He grins at being able to wring such a response from me, something sadistic and delighted in the expression. “You want that, don’t ya?”

“Yes,” I admit shakily.

I never thought I’d be so into the idea of knife play, of all things, but the fact that it’s Caelan, the thrill of being at the mercy of someone so powerful and deadly, leaves me helplessly turned on.

His lips finally crash against mine, and he rolls his hips up as he thoroughly claims my mouth. His hardness grinds against me through his jeans, and I moan, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and rocking against him. The friction of it feels so *good*. I’m already getting so damn wet just from that much stimulation and anticipation of what’s to come.

Those vicious nails of his scratch down my sides and catch on the lace of my garter belt. Then Elias’ fingers join them, his strong hands splaying across my shoulders and caressing down my spine.

“Now, dear,” he murmurs in gentle admonishment. “Let’s not get too carried away just yet.”

When I reluctantly sigh and break away from Caelan’s kiss, I find Elias smirking down at me. He has a length of rope in his hand, and many more laid out in a neat pile on the bed.

I bite my lip. *Ropes. Right.*

Elias takes my leash from Caelan and dissolves it back into nothing with

a twist of his fingers. Apparently, it's not necessary anymore.

"Come here," Elias demands. The moment I obediently scramble off Caelan's lap, Elias loops the rope around me and yanks me roughly against him.

I give a startled yelp, then shiver in delight. The rope bites into my arms, and my body ends up flush against the hard length of Elias'. He's taken off his jacket and tie, loosened the top buttons of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. But he's still very much dressed. My breasts press against his chest, half bare, and my face heats up again.

He slides the rope where it's wrapped tight around me, and I can feel every inch of it. The friction is like a gentle burn as it moves against my skin.

"Just let me control you," he commands, soft yet demanding obedience, and oh, that is something I am so very willing to do.

I sigh, letting the tension drain from my body. As much as I can when part of me is utterly thrumming with want. "Yes, Sir."

He smirks, then grips my throat with one hand and throws me onto the bed. I gasp but don't have time to react before he's on top of me.

Elias straddles my hips to hold me down while his hands, still holding the rope, pin my wrists and immediately tie them together with brutal efficiency.

I don't fight it, even though my heart is racing and being pinned down like that makes me desperately want to squirm beneath him. To roll my hips up against him, grind into the hardness pressing against me. I try to distract myself from the need to move by focusing on his face instead. His eyebrows are slightly furrowed in concentration, and the shadows of his black magic curl around him in that agitated way they do when he starts to get worked up or possessive.

He's gorgeous.

Elias growls. "Stop looking at me like that, love. Otherwise this will be over far too quickly."

"I'm sorry," I say, but I don't stop looking. I can't.

Elias huffs as he tugs on the rope to yank my bound wrists down to rest in front of my chest.

“Caelan? Fetch a blindfold.”

“Why am I always your errand boy? You know you could just make one yourself,” he gripes. Despite his noises of annoyance, Caelan obligingly gets up to fetch the requested item. I try to twist my head to follow where he’s going, but Elias takes hold of my jaw and pulls me back to face him.

“Oh, *now* you want to look away?” Elias says, his low tone dripping with irony. His grip is tight, not enough to hurt, but enough to let me feel his strength. I can’t get away from him at all.

Elias pulls me upright and shifts me to kneel with my back against his chest. He holds me still with one arm, his embrace like an iron vice around me, while the other reaches for the next length of rope. There’s an effortless grace to it, the way he flings the rope out to straighten it, that betrays his experience in this.

The last thing I see before my vision goes dark is Elias’ heated smile. Caelan has wrapped a length of black silk around my eyes, tying it tightly behind my head. My breath catches. If I can’t see, I don’t know what’s coming, and I feel even more vulnerable before them. They could do anything.

The thought is utterly thrilling.

“Tie her legs,” comes Elias’ instruction.

“With pleasure,” Caelan replies wickedly, his grin audible.

Then there are two pairs of hands on me. Two pairs of hands, rope sliding against my skin, and the bite of it as it’s pulled tight around me. The lack of sight only serves to heighten my awareness, every touch makes me shiver when I’m so on edge. The push and pull of it feels like Elias’ hands are always in contact with me somewhere, roughly manipulating my body with his own while he binds me. Between knots, he grabs my hair, pulls my head back, and grazes his teeth against my throat, against the bruised flesh where

Caelan has already left hickeys, and I whimper.

By the time he's done, I can't move at all.

Elias has created a harness wrapped around me. My arms are bound to my sides, elbows bent, wrists tied together in front of me with hands clasped as if in prayer. It's wound around my chest, waist, and hips, between my legs, and between my breasts to frame them almost obscenely.

I shift experimentally against the ropes, but they're too taut to allow me any room to wriggle. Just the right amount of tension that I can't escape the constant awareness of them, so deliciously tight, but not enough to risk cutting off too much circulation.

And Caelan.

Caelan binds each of my legs separately, my knees bent and thighs spread for him. His nails purposefully drag vivid scratches into my flesh as he works just to hear the groans it wrings from me. He can't resist running the rope over me in warning, then whipping my exposed inner thigh with the end of the length. He laughs as I jerk and moan his name.

"Aw, does that sting, doll?"

"Please, Caelan," I breathe, then gasp and arch back against Elias as Caelan strikes me with the rope again.

"Caelan," Elias admonishes.

"I'm just playing."

A teasing note enters Elias' voice, even though it remains low and even. "We have far better things to use for that than rope. Why not go get the riding crop?"

Caelan cackles in delight.

I feel the shift of the bed as he moves off it. "Oh, shit," I murmur, assuming he's gone to get exactly that. Not that I don't like the idea, just, *shit*.

For a moment I tense, fighting against the ropes just to see if I can, but it's clear I'm not going anywhere. I'm bound and helpless, and they can do

anything they like to me—hurt me, tease me, use me. *Yes.* It’s exactly what I wanted.

Elias runs his hands over me, and he hums in appreciation. “Such a pretty picture, wrapped up in patterns of ropes and knots, all black lace and smooth skin.”

His fingers caress the edges of the rope where my flesh yields, slowly working his way down my body.

I can feel his shadows against me—their soft static raises the hairs on my arms. Every touch seems magnified like this. Unable to move, unable to see, all I can do is feel, and I feel so much more intensely for it.

I know where he’s going. I can tell from the smirk on his lips as he presses them against my jaw, and my heart races in anticipation.

Elias gets to the edge of my panties and stops, only toying with the lace.

“Touch me,” I burst. “God, Elias, *please.*”

I can’t touch myself. I can’t get any friction at all, and he’s just *teasing.*

Elias chuckles lowly beside my ear. “Patience, dear. Is it really that easy to get you worked up?”

I whine. *How could I not get worked up when I’m completely at their mercy? When I’ve had their touch all over me this entire time with no relief?*

“Please,” I beg again softly, but Elias only withdraws his touch entirely. I realize why when it’s replaced by the cool brush of leather.

“Found something else as well.” Caelan purrs as he clambers back onto the bed and settles between my bound thighs, trailing the tip of what I can only presume is the riding crop over my stomach, making the muscles quiver. *The crop, and what?*

Elias hums with approval at whatever other toy it is that Caelan has.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Oh, you’ll find out, doll.”

Then the wide tip of the crop strikes right against my cunt, and I shriek.

It’s more surprise than any real pain. He didn’t hit me hard enough to hurt

that badly. It just smarts, stinging in a way that I can't quite work out if it's pain or pleasure.

Caelan *laughs* and does it again, and I gasp and writhe against Elias' hold.

"You wanted to be touched, didn't you?"

I can only moan in response. He runs the crop firmly over the crotch of my panties, rubbing it between my legs and sending white-hot pleasure sparking through me.

"N-nngh! Caelan..." I whine.

"Fuckin' adorable. Look how much you're already dripping for us."

He's right. Despite how sensitive it is, it's only getting me more turned on, not less.

Caelan leans in. I can feel his breath against me, his presence. Like this, I'm hyperaware of his low hum of power, a sort of electric quality.

"You gonna scream for me if I whip your cunt?"

I only moan.

My answer doesn't matter. He's going to find out first-hand either way.

That's not where he hits first, though. He strikes the crop against my inner thigh with a sharp crack, then immediately dives in to bite over the top of the stinging mark left in its wake. And as if that wasn't enough, Elias slides his hands around my throat, his grip tight enough to send a primal thrill of mixed fear and lust through me. He yanks my head back and viciously claims my mouth.

"Tighter," I moan against his lips. *Fuck. The feel of his hands around me like that*— "Choke me, Master!"

There's a moment's pause, then Elias takes a sharp, aroused breath, and he obliges.

I groan, trembling against him as I offer myself in submission—his strong hands, those rough fingers, squeezing around my throat. He's restricting my blood supply rather than putting pressure on my windpipe. It's safer that way,

but it's still more than enough to make my head spin, and white stars burst behind my closed eyes. So heady and helpless.

And then the riding crop, making me jerk and squirm as Caelan strikes it against my thighs and between my legs, making me scream, just like he promised.

Both of their heated mouths on me, Elias' tongue ravages my mouth and swallows my needy cries, while Caelan teases my bruised, stinging thighs with the graze of his teeth.

Their hands are all over me, and I can't even keep track of whose touch is whose. There's too much happening, and I can't focus. It's a lot. Pain and pleasure. I can barely breathe, but I love it, and just—yes.

Yes, yes, yes.

I wish I could touch them in return. That's my only frustration. But the frustration is perfect, too, because their control is absolute, and I have no choice but to surrender my own desires and concede to their will instead. Surrendering to Elias and Caelan completely.

That doesn't mean I'll surrender quietly.

Caelan chuckles and teases my dripping core through my panties, and I finally break into a sob. "Please! More, I need—"

Elias' grip on my throat tightens for just a moment of warning, and my eyes roll back behind the blindfold. "You *need*, darling?" he repeats dangerously.

I whimper. "P-please..."

"Hmm... Caelan?"

Caelan's laugh sends shivers down my spine. "That's right. I gotcha another present."

"The knife?"

"Hah. Well, that too. If you can handle this without squirming too much."

I don't have long to ponder what he means by that, because the answer comes swiftly. The vibrator whirring to life is the only warning I get. Caelan

slides the toy inside my panties and presses it right up against my clit.

“Oh, *fuck!*” My hips involuntarily buck up, seeking contact, and heat floods my face.

It’s a slim thing, a butterfly vibrator. It’s not even on the most powerful setting, but it’s enough to drive me wild. I can’t get away from the pleasure at all.

“So gorgeously responsive,” Elias murmurs, amused.

He finally let’s go of my throat for good, and I gasp in shuddering breaths at the same time as I moan at the loss. I feel him reach away, then there are more tugs on the harness around me, and the slide of more lengths of rope looping into my bindings.

“Mmm, Elias?” I ask. My voice comes out so shaky and needy. *That damn vibrator—*

“Trust me, dear,” he says, his smirk practically audible. Then Elias is gone. He was the only thing holding me up, and I lurch backward at the abrupt loss of support. But I never hit the bed. The ropes catch me in midair and yank me back up, my heart in my throat and a gasp on my lips.

Elias tugs on the ropes, holding me suspended in this new position. The bed shifts as he, I presume, moves to secure the ropes. The suspension hooks in the bed frame suddenly make a lot of sense.

The harness around my chest and hips is sturdy enough to take my weight, knees still bracing me against the covers, but my torso is completely raised. Almost horizontal above the bed, a gentle arch with my head falling back in a way that feels freeing.

Completely bound, suspended, and unable to move at all, yet there’s something beautifully liberating in the sensation of defying gravity. I breathe out and surrender myself to the entanglement of Elias’ bindings.

“Comfortable?” Elias sounds smug, so self-satisfied with his handiwork, but there is a genuine question in it.

I shift against the ropes and the vibrator in the process. That starts me

back to reality and draws another whimper from me.

“I’d be more comfortable with your dick in me,” I mutter. It’s distracting, and the vibrations against me are making me *ache*. I need to be filled so badly.

I wasn’t trying to be snarky. Caelan’s delighted laugh at my response catches me by surprise.

“Soon enough, doll,” Caelan promises. “But first…” He trails off, then a cold blade is pressed into my thigh.

Shit. The knife. Even knowing how skilled Caelan is with a blade, it sets a delicious chill of fear curling through my gut. That thing is *sharp*, and I’m bound, helpless, and quivering.

Heat pulses through me in time with the toy’s vibrations, my skin growing slick with sweat, and the drag of the metal knife tip trailing against me makes me gasp at the sharp, icy contrast.

It’s like when he played with me with the knife before. But worse. Because it’s not just Caelan, it’s Elias as well. *Both of them, and the vibrator, and—*

Elias takes my head between his hands, then his cock brushes against my cheek. *Oh. Oh, damn.*

“Can you handle both at once?” he asks. Caelan’s knife and Elias’ cock. They’re going to overwhelm me, they’re going to break me, I know it, but at the same time, that’s exactly what I *want*.

I nod, parting my lips to let him in.

Elias’ cock fills my mouth. My head is tilted all the way back to take him down my throat, swallowing around him as tears prick my eyes and I desperately try to breathe. There’s the biting sting of Caelan’s knife, teasingly nicking my flesh, and his tongue curling against the wounds he leaves. And the vibrator, set too low to push me over the edge, succeeds in leaving me wet and needy and so damn desperate.

I’m gone. I’m fucking gone. Senses overloaded, nerves fried, body

flooded with pleasure, and it feels so good. Too good to even bear. *Maybe this is what euphoria is.* My mind feels miles away, suspended in the heady bliss of it all, and my body is their toy to use as they please.

I could stay like this forever, yet every moment passes by in an instant.

Elias comes down my throat, and at some point, Caelan casts the knife aside and pulls my panties out of the way so he can sink his cock into me, gripping my hips and fucking me until he's done with me as well.

I can't think. I can barely breathe. I'm half aware of the noises I'm making, moaning for them, my desperate, needy pleas, the screams when Caelan's cock thrusts into me just right, but it sounds so distant to my own ears. I'm half aware of their noises too—the way Caelan groans as he fucks me and Elias' panting breaths and filthy murmurs of encouragement.

I'm certain I must come at some point. Several times, probably. It all blurs into one mess of shuddering, white-hot pleasure, and it's *so good, so good, so good.*

This must be what it feels like to die and go to heaven.

This is.

Heaven.

Eventually, I realize the new stillness I feel isn't just the blissed out, floaty sensation of my mind. They have lowered me, and I'm being held in their arms.

I shift, groaning, and finally become aware of Elias murmuring my name.

A hand strokes my hair and another runs over my legs and arms, rubbing the chafed, reddened skin where the ropes were. *Ropes?* There are no ropes now. There's a blanket wrapped around me instead.

The blindfold comes off, and I squint against the sudden brightness.

"Elias?" I murmur. "Caelan?"

"Think you might've gone a little subpacey on us there, doll," Caelan says, huffing a laugh. He rubs my arms reassuringly, then leans up and kisses me.

I stare at him with eyes still glazed over. “Oh,” I say, brain not processing the thought at all.

“Are you all right?” Elias asks.

“Mmm... amazing.” The words come out slurred, and both demons seem amused by that fact.

It is a slow process, but my brain gradually reengages as my heart rate and breathing evens out, enough for me to realize I’m trembling and that my body aches. Not the needy ache from before. No, that’s been thoroughly satisfied. This is the ache of having been used. My throat is sore, there’s rope burns all over me, and the shallow scratches left by Caelan’s knife scattered across my stomach and thighs sting. My muscles are overworked and quivering from being bound up and held in one position for so long. My neck feels tender and bruised, hickeys mar my skin. I don’t remember getting half of them.

“Wow.” I breathe out.

Elias still isn’t letting me go, his hands rubbing my shoulders through the blanket. The contact is nice. Grounding.

“I take it you’ve never experienced subspace before?”

“Nothing like that.”

“Perhaps we should have started you a little slower.”

“It’s okay.” I giggle. “I had fun. Um... did you?” I was so out of my mind I didn’t even get to think about their pleasure. And they’re demons, after all. I’ve seen their stamina, and I doubt one round is enough to satisfy them.

Elias kisses me. “Plenty,” is his answer. He cups my chin, his thumb running along my jaw as he tilts my head back to observe me. His expression is serious. Desire, but something deeper than that, too, runs like a dark, underlying current in his eyes. “You have no idea how *satisfying* it is,” Elias says lowly. “The way you submit to us.”

“Such a precious little plaything,” Caelan agrees. There’s a smear of blood on his lips. Mine, I presume, and I lean in like I’m hypnotized, unable

to resist licking it off. Which, of course, results in Caelan kissing me firmly back in response.

“All right,” Elias gently interrupts when Caelan shows no sign of letting me up. “We should get you some water, and maybe something to eat to stabilize your blood sugar since that scene became so intense for you.”

I break away from Caelan’s kiss with a quiet moan. “I’m fine,” I try to reassure Elias. Unfortunately, my body doesn’t agree with my words. I try to sit up by myself, and just that much is enough to leave me feeling dizzy.

Caelan snorts and catches me as I tilt, pulling me into his lap, blanket and all. “Elias is right. We ought to get you fixed up. I got sour gummy worms if you want some.”

I blink at him. “Why?”

“ ’Cause as Elias just said, playing that hard can mess you up, and the sugar will do you good.”

“I mean, why do you have sour gummy worms?”

Caelan levels me with a look of mock offense. “If I want some goddamn gummy worms, I’ll have some goddamn gummy worms.”

“I’m not judging!” I laugh. “Just seemed an odd thing for a demon to have.”

“We don’t strictly need sustenance,” Elias explains smoothly. “But Caelan enjoys strange things.”

I raise a wry eyebrow and pointedly glance at the room around us. “I think we all enjoy strange things.”

Elias huffs a short laugh. “I see you’re recovered enough to get your sass back.”

I grin and lean back over to kiss him.

They adjust their clothing. Neither of them had undressed fully, only removing enough to allow them to get to me comfortably. Caelan does up his jeans but remains shirtless, while Elias redresses to an almost presentable level. It would be presentable if not for how rumpled his shirt is, and it

pleases me immensely that I'm the reason he's so far from his usual state of immaculate.

Caelan carries me to the kitchen and sits me on the counter, still wrapped in the blanket, which is probably best given my current state. Sitting directly on the counter would be somewhat of a biohazard.

I obligingly accept a glass of water and some of Caelan's sweets. He said they were sour, but I didn't realize *how* sour. Caelan cackles at my expression when the first one hits my tongue.

Upstairs, they lay me down on the master bed and help me wriggle out of my lingerie. The panties, especially, are in dire need of a wash.

"Do you want a shower, dear?" Elias suggests.

"Mmm," is my only response. I know I *should* get cleaned up, but the bed is far too comfy, and I feel boneless, satisfied, and distinctly disinclined to move.

"Bath, then."

"I'll fall asleep in it," I warn.

Despite my reluctance, I eventually manage to roll over and clamber out of bed. I settle for the less thorough but less effort method of wiping myself down with a damp towel, promising I'll shower properly in the morning. I let Caelan fix up the smattering of small cuts from tonight's round of knife play while Elias vanishes downstairs. To tidy up the playroom, Caelan says, but Elias also has my nightie when he returns.

I gratefully slip it over my head, then curl up beneath the covers. Elias and Caelan change into comfortable sleep clothes, too, and join me.

Caelan spoons me from behind, pressing kisses against my neck while I face Elias and let our foreheads press together. He rests his hand on my waist, and I sigh softly.

"Sorry you didn't get to play that much," I murmur.

Caelan snorts. "What're you apologizing for?"

"I mean, you normally get a few rounds in. My stamina isn't quite up to

the same level as a demon's, I guess.”

Elias gives me a reassuring kiss. “We did something new and strenuous for you. I’m certain your stamina for more involved scenes will come with time, and even if it doesn’t, that in no way negates what fun we can have with you.”

“Hmm... what about when it’s just the two of you?”

“What about it?” Elias asks.

I turn and grin. “Do you guys do ‘involved scenes’ when I’m not around?”

“We’ve been, perhaps not together, strictly speaking, but we have had relations for a long time. Plenty of scenes have been involved, yes.”

“‘Had relations,’” Caelan repeats with a laugh. “You mean we were fuck buddies who couldn’t stand each other but couldn’t resist each other either.”

“That sounds... complicated.”

Caelan shrugs. “We got over it. And it’s not like we still don’t get on each other’s nerves, but...”

“But what?” Elias questions, his expectantly raised eyebrow daring Caelan to continue.

“Yeah, yeah. You want me to stroke your ego as well as your dick? But being together is worth it.”

I cuddle the covers tighter around me and coo. “Aww, that’s sweet.”

Caelan bites down on my shoulder, teeth tugging at the flesh just hard enough to send a jolt through me. “We’re not fuckin’ *sweet*.”

“You kind of are. You can be. Sometimes.”

“See how damn sweet you think it is when I’ve got my dagger stabbed right through Elias’ hands to pin him down while I fuck him to within an inch of his life,” Caelan mutters.

“That was *one* time, Caelan.”

I giggle, then try desperately not to giggle, and only end up choking. “Isn’t that painful?”

“It’s different for demons,” Elias reassures me. “Such injuries mean little and heal rapidly. We would never play that hard with you.”

“Mmm... actual bodily harm is a bit much for me.” I roll over onto my back, turning my head to face Caelan and grin. “Tell me more about you rawing Elias to within an inch of his life.”

“This doesn’t need to be discussed.”

“You’ll have to watch us sometime, Shan,” Caelan says, completely ignoring Elias. “The way he *moans* could make you come untouched, I swear.”

“As if you don’t beg like a whore for my cock,” Elias rebuts.

“Having also taken your cock, I can confirm begging for it is a completely understandable sentiment,” I rationalize on Caelan's behalf.

Elias huffs a laugh. “I presume I should be flattered.”

“You should,” I confirm, then squeak in surprise as Elias pulls me in to kiss me thoroughly. I’m sighing softly by the time he finally lets up.

Caelan takes his turn to kiss me too. Then, with a wicked grin, he leans over me to drag Elias up by the collar of his pajama shirt and thoroughly smooch him as well.

There’s a momentary scuffle as Elias, unwilling to take Caelan’s attempts at claiming control, shoves Caelan back down onto the bed, trapping me beneath him in the process and making me yelp and laugh.

We eventually settle back into our places, more flustered than before but beaming. *God. Being with them is just... so much fun.*

I love them. And tomorrow we get to spend the whole day together, in this house of theirs that they apparently now own, then go out to celebrate my six-month anniversary with them.

I don’t think there’s anything that could ruin this for me.

Chapter Twenty-One

The morning so far has been another slow, sleepy one. I was the last to wake. Elias and Caelan were already up, quietly wrapped up in each other. Caelan, with his arms folded and head resting on Elias' chest, smirks while he teases Elias, and Elias has one hand tangled into Caelan's hair. The other hand was somewhere out of sight. From the general outline beneath the sheets and by the way Caelan was grinning, I would have placed good money on Elias' other hand being firmly on Caelan's ass.

So that was a pleasant sight to wake up to.

They had both kissed me good morning, and I was content to simply lay there with them for a while. I would have stayed in bed all day if I could, but I also couldn't deny that the lack of a shower last night had left me feeling gross.

Reluctantly, I inform them of my plan to go and wash, then slide out of bed before I change my mind.

The spray of the hot water helped me feel more awake and relax the muscles I hadn't even realized were still sore and achy from last night. And, of course, I'd had time to take stock of all the new markings they'd left on me.

I'm covered in hickeys and bitemarks and bruises again.

Grinning to myself, I glance at the mirror to admire the markings while I

towel myself dry after a much-needed morning shower. It seems that every time I end up sleeping with Elias and Caelan, I come away absolutely covered in the marks of their claim on me.

And I love that.

There is some faint bruising around my throat, and pale pink scratches left by Caelan's knife. My inner thighs are the worst off—there's a mess of purpling welts from the riding crop mixed with the hickeys and bites. There's a tiny amount of bruising and chafing in some places where the ropes were, where I struggled most, mainly around my wrists, shoulders, and hips, but that's barely noticeable.

Wrapping myself in a towel, I return to the bedroom.

In my absence, Elias has gotten out of bed, too, and he's dressed in trousers and an ever so slightly more casual dress shirt. Caelan is still sprawled out lazily on the bed in his sleep pants.

He grins as he sees me and sits up, grabbing my hips as soon as I'm close enough and pulling me onto the bed with him.

"Caelan!" I protest, with a noise that's half-yelp and half-laugh. I try to clutch the towel as I topple over, ending up lying on my back beside Caelan.

"What's the hurry to get up?" he drawls. "We don't gotta go anywhere."

"We don't *have* to go anywhere," Elias agrees, amused. "But do you really want to stay in bed all day?"

"Uh. Yeah?"

The way Caelan says it as if that's the most obvious thing in the world and Elias is an idiot for not already knowing that, *of course*, that would be Caelan's answer, makes me laugh.

"I know there's nothing planned, but... is there anything you'd like to do?" I ask Elias.

"Not particularly. Until it is time to leave for the restaurant, you're welcome to do as you please and explore the house at your leisure."

Caelan props himself up on his elbow. "You know, a house ain't really a

home until it's been fucked in," he says, his grin a mile wide as he leers down at me.

"We already—"

"We christened the basement, sure. There's still a whole lotta other rooms, though."

"Oh my God, Caelan," I say between giggles.

"Do you ever think with anything other than your dick?" Elias comments wryly.

"Are you saying you *don't* want to fuck in every room of the house?"

Elias considers this with quiet bemusement. "It's not that I dislike the idea," he clarifies. "But that may be a little too much to achieve in one day."

"Coward. Don't back down from a challenge."

He looks impatient at Caelan's continued insistence now. "There is no rush. We all have plenty of time together."

"C'mon, don't be a—"

Caelan doesn't get to finish his sentence. He cuts off with a sharp breath as Elias steps to the bedside and grabs Caelan by the throat, pressing him down into the covers. "Your idea is foolish, and we don't want to overwork our pet, do we? So, unless you want *me* to fuck *you* right here and now, I suggest you drop the matter."

It's clear from his tone of voice that Elias means it as a punishment. Or as much as a punishment as getting fucked by him could ever be, which is to say not much of a punishment at all. But still.

"Wow," I mutter, squirming slightly. Even if not strictly directed at me, it's still one hell of a turn on to see Elias acting so damn dominating. And his voice, deep and rough and demanding obedience.

"Well, shit," Caelan agrees. His voice sounds rough too. "If I wasn't hard before, I sure am now."

Elias shakes his head, but there's a hint of fond exasperation in the quirk of his lips. "You're impossible."

“Okay,” I say. “But Caelan does have a point.”

They both look at me, Elias with surprise and Caelan with distinct interest.

“Not about the fucking,” I quickly clarify, laughing. “I mean what he said about the house not being a home yet. You guys must have only just got it, right?”

“The sale was completed last week,” Elias confirms.

“And you’ve got all the essentials and things like furniture, but it kind of feels like a show home still, you know? So, I was thinking...” I trail off, wrapping my towel around me a little tighter, as if by covering myself more, I can hide from their gaze.

They’re both looking at me curiously, and all of a sudden, my idea feels utterly idiotic to be suggesting to a pair of demons.

“Um... we could go shopping. Like, to Ikea or some other homeware store like that. And just buy dumb shit to clutter the place up with.”

Caelan coos. “That’s adorable.”

Elias thinks the statement through and huffs a quiet laugh at the conclusion. “I like the implication there that a fully stocked kink room is considered an essential.”

“You’re the ones who decided that one, not me.” I grin.

“Heh. Well, *obviously* it’s essential,” Caelan says. “But nah, that was easy because we just brought over the stuff we already used all the time.”

That is also a point to take into consideration, and now my idea feels even more dumb. “I mean, if you guys can just bring stuff over from your other places, we don’t need to do the shopping thing. It’d be kind of pointless.”

“No, I don’t believe so,” Elias slowly reassures me. “We don’t have much in the way of what you would consider human comforts.”

“Even then, though, I guess you could just... make things yourself?” I say. Like he did with my collar or the masks he created for Caelan and me at the gala.

“But,” Caelan interrupts. “That’s way too much effort. Besides, the fun part of shopping is seeing all the junk you never even imagined you needed.”

He’s not just saying that for the sake of mollifying me. He seems kind of interested in the whole idea.

“Yeah... yeah, I guess that’s true.”

Caelan grins. “See, I know what’s up.”

“I think it does seem a rather pleasant idea,” Elias agrees. “Perhaps some greenery would liven the place up.”

“Ugh, you know I kill every plant I come into contact with.”

Elias gives Caelan a sardonic look. “If you didn’t slash them in half, they might last longer.” It sounds distinctly like there’s a story behind that statement.

“Why?” I ask, amused. The question is directed at Caelan, asking why he’d stab a plant.

“Look, I was just testing out the sharpness of a new dagger I got, and the plant was the nearest sturdy thing to see if it’d slice through,” Caelan grumbles. “It’s not *weird*.”

That only makes me giggle harder.

“In any case,” Elias says smoothly, attempting to keep our conversation on track. It’s a task that’s like herding cats sometimes. “Why don’t you two get dressed, we’ll arrange some breakfast, then we can go and do that. Yes?”

“Sounds good.” I swing my legs off the bed and stand to kiss him.

It was only meant to be a quick kiss, but I’m far too easily distracted. All it takes is his lips moving against mine to make me feel weak. His hands wrap around my waist, and I’m suddenly acutely aware that all I’m wearing is a towel.

I sigh as Elias’ tongue strokes inside my mouth, tasting me. My hands slide up his back, clinging tighter to him as my body presses up against his.

He laughs softly as he breaks away from the kiss. “Go and get dressed then, dear.”

He knows he's left me all flustered already. My face is warm and cheeks stained red as I duck my head, stepping across the hallway to my room.

Grabbing my clothes, I get changed—jeans and a turtleneck, which is necessary to cover the marks on my neck. Caelan dresses too, and we head down to the kitchen together.

There's not much in the way of food. They don't really need it, after all, but Caelan's stocked up with bacon, and that's a perfectly acceptable breakfast as far as I'm concerned. Elias suggests that we also do some proper food shopping while we're out if I'm going to be spending any time here. Elias doesn't tend to eat often, and while Caelan does enjoy food far more, he doesn't have anything healthy available. Elias insists I should at least be able to take care of myself properly while I'm with them.

Considering the other option is subsisting on bacon and gummy worms, I'm happy to agree.

After a moment's discussion, mainly consisting of why followed by why not, it's decided that we'll drive. Despite the extra time it'll take, Elias says their only purpose today is to spend time with me, and the journey is a pleasant excuse to just sit and talk.

At least until Caelan gets hold of the radio, and journey devolves into a personal concert, but that's another matter. Elias sings for me and invites me into a duet, and I'm simultaneously flustered and beaming.

We end up at a large retail park, with multiple homeware stores and other big box chains. There's no goal in mind. We simply gravitate toward anything that catches our fancy.

In a smaller, more eclectic store, Caelan finds what appears to be a baby shark preserved in a jar of formaldehyde, which he crows over as being badass. I hope it isn't real.

That's the first purchase for the day. "I see we're off to a fabulous start," Elias comments dryly, and I grin.

But aside from that, it's a relatively normal trip. The bigger stores are full

of furniture, do-it-yourself equipment I have no use for, and smaller homewares and accessories I don't need but could potentially find a use for. Caelan and I take great delight in finding the weirder items around. A hanging dryer with eight curled spokes and eyes on it to make it look like an octopus, and a dartboard masquerading as a formal painting which is rejected by Elias.

“Absolutely not, we do not need to encourage Caelan to be throwing sharp objects around.”

They make some actual purchases too. Elias finds a selection of desk organizers and folders he deems useful, and Caelan vanishes for a suspiciously long time before I find him in the kitchen section with two knives he's decided are pretty and sturdy enough to want.

It's nice, wandering around with them through the displays, but something about it doesn't sit quite right. It's *too* nice. Too domestic. I glance at Elias, and even in his glamour, looking entirely human for all the world, he seems out of place.

“I'm sorry,” I murmur, keeping my voice down so the other shoppers around can't hear us.

Elias glances at me in surprise. “What for?”

“This must be so... human.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“I don't know. You tell me.” I pause. “You just didn't look comfortable, that's all.”

He chuckles and kisses my forehead. “Perhaps. It's certainly very different to what I'm familiar with. Caelan often informs me that I need to take time off to relax, to ‘take the stick out of my ass,’ as he so eloquently puts it, but it's not something that comes entirely naturally just yet.”

I give Elias a suspicious squint. “That's it? You're just not used to relaxing?”

He only hums affirmatively in response.

I'm not so sure. Elias still seems a little distant, not even calling Caelan out or trying to rein him in when he makes noises about testing out the display beds. A process that gets as far as him sitting me down on the edge of one and making me giggle by kissing me thoroughly, with some minor groping involved, before a small gaggle of shoppers walk by. I blush and hastily shove Caelan off of me. Even after that, Elias is still wearing the expression he gets when lost in thought, frowning as he weighs an internal debate.

Even though it feels pointless to buy things for a house I don't live in, Elias and Caelan encourage me to get whatever I like. Honestly, I don't feel the need for much. Some candles, a cute basket I have no idea what to put in it, but it's nice and cheap, and some toiletries since I didn't think to bring any. I get the usual shampoo and conditioner, shower gel, and a hot sugar scrub and bath bomb as a couple of extra luxuries.

In the garden section, we get some of the plants Elias had mentioned. He selects a large crystal vase, too, and buys a bouquet of roses to fill it with.

For not strictly needing to buy anything, we come away with quite a lot. But then again, that's usually how these sorts of trips go, and I laugh as I explain that to Elias and Caelan.

"Humans are weird," Caelan comments.

"You have no room to be judging anyone on buying needless items," Elias replies. "You bought a taxidermy shark and more knives, of which you already have a collection of at least twenty, yet always use the same one when required."

We eat a late lunch once we're done shopping before returning home to sort through our purchases. Then I spend the rest of the afternoon outside. There's something oddly intimate about wasting time with Elias in the garden.

He didn't like the cheap pots that the plants came in and bought replacements, and I agreed to help him repot them. I spend more time just

looking at Elias, sleeves rolled up and soil on his hands, than helping. And when I do try to help shift one of the larger plants across to its new pot, my fingers just end up brushing against his. Elias smirks as he looks up, meeting my eyes, and my face flushes.

That task complete, I return upstairs to wash my hands, but glancing at the time, I figure it's late enough for me to start getting ready to go out for real.

“What should I wear?” I ask Elias. “I presume we're going somewhere fancy?”

He gives a quiet laugh. “I suppose so. It is our six-month anniversary. It would be remiss of me not to make a little effort.”

He's probably understating it. A 'little effort' is going to be somewhere expensive. I know him. “Mmm, I figured as much.” I smile.

I brought a nice dress with me in preparation for precisely that reason. A slinky black thing with a halter neck and ruched at one side while the rest of the fabric cascades to the floor. The neckline scoops low, and a panel studded with black stones covers most of the cleavage that would otherwise be visible. High heels too. I may not be a fan of heels, but I'd tried on a pair in the same thrift shop where I'd found the dress, and the way they made my legs look so much longer and sexier was too good not to buy them.

I feel kind of hot wearing the heels. Maybe not the greatest balance-wise since I'm so unpracticed, but if it gives me an additional excuse to hold tight to Elias and Caelan's sides, then I'm fine with it.

With my dress on, hair brushed into submission, and a touch of makeup applied, I rejoin them in the living room. Elias, at least, as Caelan must still be upstairs.

I've picked up the habit of wearing more eyeliner because it looks so good on Elias, and I've used concealer to cover the worst of the hickeys and markings visible around my neck.

Elias is sitting at the piano, his back to me as I come down the stairs.

There are two things I notice. First, he hasn't put his jacket on yet. It's draped over the edge of the piano, thus allowing me to see that he's wearing suspenders over the fresh white dress shirt he's changed into. Second, although the piano is playing, he's not actually playing it himself. His hands are folded in his lap as he simply watches on.

Both observations clash in my mind, and I'm not sure which to focus on first. I go with the fact the piano is seemingly playing itself. That seems more bewildering.

I step closer. Elias must be able to hear me, as my heels click loudly on the wooden floor, but he doesn't turn immediately. Curiously, I glance over his shoulder.

He's not touching the piano himself, but as I approach, I can see the faint touch of shadows caressing the keys as the melody plays. *Ah. So that's it.* I don't recognize the song, but, of course, it's something slow and somber. Melodramatic edgelord indeed.

I laugh softly and wrap my arms around him from behind. Of course, he plays piano. He does for Goëtica. It wasn't as though I weren't aware of the fact. But, like a lot of other things about the house, it's rather overkill when just a keyboard would have sufficed.

"I should have figured you'd have a big, old-fashioned grand piano here," I tease. "Every good brooding, romantic antihero plays."

He raises his hand to cover mine. His shadows keep on playing, despite his lack of attention to them. "Is that what you think I am?"

"No, not really," I admit. Our fingers tangle together where Elias' hand is on mine, but my other hand slides over his chest. I trace the line of his suspenders curiously. It's so incredibly tempting to just pull on them. "You're much more than that to me."

"I might believe it more if you weren't feeling me up as you said it," he suggests, one eyebrow raised, and I laugh.

The next moment my breath catches. The piano stops, and those shadows,

the manifestation of Elias' power curling through the fabric of this reality like a tainted fog, reach for me instead. I can feel them against my skin, crawling up my arms, wrapping around my legs, the cold static of their phantom touch. I freeze, eyes widening. *That's new.*

Elias turns on the piano stool to face me, a smirk curling on his lips. He stands, and even with my high heels, he's still taller than me. He presses a finger against my lips. "No touching without permission tonight, dear," he commands quietly.

"Oh... okay," I say, trying to pretend I'm not already breathless. Trying to pretend that the caress of his power, of his darkness, doesn't make me want to shiver. *What is that?*

"We have a lot to discuss tonight," Elias murmurs. His fingers graze against my jaw, tilting my chin up so he can brush his lips against mine. He presses a soft kiss there, then against my cheekbone, then moves lower to kiss my neck.

The affection is gentle, unhurried and unheated. But between that and the way his shadows curl around me, I can feel warmth starting to rise to my cheeks. "Good discuss or bad discuss?"

"Good. I hope."

I hope so too.

Elias slowly draws away, his kisses and his shadows as well, they fade back into nothingness. He steps back and runs his eyes over me, the corners of his lips curling up in appreciation. "You look lovely."

I grin in return. "You too. I like the suspenders."

Elias raises an eyebrow. "You and Caelan both. It has been rather a task to keep him from tugging on them incessantly."

That I can certainly imagine. "Is that what the no-touching rule is for?"

"Not so specifically." Elias chuckles. "I simply know how lacking in decorum Caelan can be when we go to places such as these, and he's been a bad influence on you in the past. At least I can trust you to obey my wishes."

“Who’s a fuckin’ bad influence?” A faint crackle of electricity sparks through the air, then Caelan is suddenly beside us. Apparently, he thought teleporting down was a better way to get the living room than using the stairs. “Don’t think I didn’t hear you talking shit about me.”

I laugh. “Hi, Caelan.”

He’s dressed nicely as well. Jeans, black and tight but not ripped for once, and a black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up and top buttons undone. With a wicked grin, Caelan grabs hold of Elias’ suspenders and yanks on them, dragging Elias forward to kiss him firmly. And rather violently.

It’s short-lived, but tongue is definitely involved.

“Gotcha.” Caelan cackles, then turns that grin to me. “God, I’ve been wanting to do that since Elias got into those dumb things, but he wouldn’t let me. Thanks for helping me catch him off guard.”

“I didn’t do anything!” I splutter. “Don’t pin it on me.”

“Caelan,” Elias chides, a low growl in his voice. That’s as much warning as Elias gives before slamming Caelan up against the wall.

Caelan groans, partially pained because Elias was not gentle at all, and I *heard* the crack of the impact, but mostly pleasure. He enjoys pissing Elias off just to get a reaction out of him. Sometimes, he likes the rough handling as much as I do, and the way Elias is pinning him with their bodies pressed together is most definitely rough.

“Don’t. Start,” Elias warns.

“Who’s starting?” Caelan asks, laughing breathlessly. He rolls his hips against Elias, forcing him to hiss. “I ain’t the one getting turned on. Is it because you were playing with our doll without me?”

“He didn’t do anything apart from give me a few kisses,” I defend. “And, um... feel me up with his shadows a little.”

My confession makes Caelan laugh harder. “Decorum, my *ass*.”

“We’re not in public yet, so there’s no problem showing affection here,” Elias says, releasing Caelan.

“Hypocrite. You had a problem with *me* smooching you.”

I understand his objectives. Elias was in control when he was toying with me. With Caelan, not so much. That makes things different.

Elias readjusts his suspenders to make sure they're neat again after being unceremoniously yanked on while saying, “Is it too much to ask for you to wait until we're finished with dinner?”

Caelan raises an eyebrow, smirking. “And then after dinner is fair game?”

“We'll see,” is all Elias says in response.

He picks up his jacket and shrugs into it, then offers me his hand. When I place my fingers in his palm, he draws me in against his chest. “Shall we go, then?”

“Where exactly are we going?”

“A restaurant in LA. They're rather renowned for their sushi. We'll go through the abyss this time. It's further to travel, and LA traffic isn't worth the hassle.”

“Plus, I don't think either of us will have the patience to drive back after we're done with dinner and can finally get our hands on you,” Caelan adds. He steps in close and takes hold of my shoulder on my other side. Then reality slips away.

My fingers tighten around Elias' hand. It's still unsettling—my stomach twists, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise as every instinct screams that I don't belong. The darkness of this place, the space between dimensions, is infinite, all-consuming, and beyond human comprehension.

But I have Elias on one side and Caelan on the other, their touch keeps me grounded. With them here, it's not so bad.

In the blink of an eye, we return to the stability of reality in the heart of LA.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The location we arrive at isn't quite what I was expecting. It seems rather unassuming from the outside—a single-story building, blocky, with slate-accented walls and wooden beams. The road beyond doesn't look like much, either. There's a pizza place and a laundry opposite—everyday mundane places. I was anticipating the restaurant being right in the middle of the glitz and bustle of a busy tourist trap area.

But then Elias leads us in, and I realize just how deceptive the exterior appearance is. The interior is dimly lit, walled with rich, dark wooden panels. There's lush seating all around, candles on the tables, and a bar backlit to display a dazzlingly colorful and expansive array of alcohol. It looks sleek and elegant and a little intimidating.

Elias has a reservation, of course, and I trail after him as we're led to one of the tables toward the back. Unfortunately, there's no real way to evenly seat three people at a square table, so I end up next to Elias in the booth-style seats while Caelan takes a chair opposite me. Presumably, this is a purposeful arrangement to minimize the likelihood of Caelan's hands wandering. It doesn't stop him from smirking and brushing his foot up my calf beneath the table, though.

“You said... there were things you wanted to discuss?” I prompt Elias, but he merely smiles at me.

“Food first,” he says. “And drinks. What would you like?”

I glance over the menu, then wince as my gaze drifts to the prices. “Seven dollars just for a single piece of sushi?”

“This is a treat for you, darling. Don’t worry about that.” He leans over and lightly kisses me. “I enjoy being able to do this.”

“You enjoy being a goddamn sugar daddy to someone who’ll actually take that bullshit,” Caelan clarifies on Elias’ behalf.

“Caelan.”

“What? I’m just saying.”

“That’s not what this is. At all.”

I giggle at the conversation. “I’ve absolutely never thought of it that way,” I reassure Elias, who looks mildly pained by Caelan’s accusations.

Only now, I *am* kind of thinking it. It doesn’t quite feel right to let Elias spend too much money on me too frequently. But I also love it when he does, despite the minor guilt, and honestly, the whole thing is still a little conflicted in my head. Maybe it shouldn’t be. I recognize that a lot of my uneasiness stems from the sense that I’m not worth it, and I *know* I need to stop thinking that way. Elias and Caelan want me. I’m worth it to them.

Still, the idea of having Elias as my sugar daddy is a little appealing. I decide to leave that unsaid, though.

Elias gives a hum of consideration as he skims through the menu, amusement lighting up his eyes as he spots something. “If you don’t mind, dear, I’ll order your drink for you.”

“Okay, sure,” I agree, passingly curious. He doesn’t normally dictate what I eat or drink, so there must be a reason for him stepping in this time.

I take the time to read through the menu properly, ignoring the prices at the side as best I can, and pick out what I want—sushi and a tuna sashimi salad. The waiter takes our orders, and I settle back to enjoy the atmosphere and company.

I’m quiet for the time being, simply drinking it in. The dim lighting and

the candles make the setting feel intimate—romantic, even. Letting Elias’ and Caelan’s low voices wash over me, I enjoy the moment, even if their conversation is a little questionable.

Elias and Caelan are discussing food, specifically the merits of pufferfish and if it would be fun or useful to poison someone with the inedible part. Caelan’s torn on being curious about how they would die and thinking poison is for boring losers too scared to get their hands dirty. I’m only moderately certain it’s a hypothetical discussion.

The drinks arrive in short order, and Elias takes them, thanking the waiter, then turns to me with a thinly veiled smirk. He holds one of the drinks out in offering, the martini glass cupped in the palm of his hand.

“This one seemed fitting for you,” he says.

I take it from him. The stem of the glass is wrapped entirely in thin red bondage rope, curling down to a delicate spiral over the base. There’s a single line of it wrapped around and over the middle of the bowl, too, tied at the bottom, and a pale red concoction fills the glass.

“Why is it tied up like that?” I ask.

“The cocktail was named ‘In Bondage.’ ”

And Elias thought of me. Given the events of last night, he’s not wrong about it being fitting.

“Is that what I am?” I tease. “In bondage to you?”

His fingers slide around my wrists, gentle, yet their grip like an iron shackle. “Yes.” His expression is oddly serious, and it makes my breath catch and a touch of heat rise to my face.

“Then, to being bound to you,” I say, offering the glass in a toast.

“To you being ours,” Elias replies.

He raises his own glass, some form of highball cocktail rather than the bondage one for him, and clinks the edge against mine. Caelan does the same after him, looking thoroughly entertained by the entire exchange.

I take a sip of the cocktail. Cautiously, since I don’t know what exactly is

in it, and from the smell of it alone, it seems very strong. I'm not wrong. *Definitely* strong, but not bad. I can feel it hit me immediately.

Something to drink slowly then.

"And since you are ours," Elias eventually continues, although he hesitates in choosing his next words. "You should be allowed to hear the truth of matters. About what we are and of other realms."

The offer takes me by surprise. They have certainly been better recently, more open with me, but I wasn't expecting Elias to open the floor entirely like that. They already shared much of their history. This time, I think he means to speak on more metaphysical matters as much as I can comprehend them.

I smile at the realization. They are not hiding from me anymore. Sharing as much as they have, offering more of this, shows how far we've come from when they were arguing over even letting me know of the abyss.

Certainly, I can't deny that I'm intrigued by how differently they must live and experience the world.

"Anything you want to tell me, I'd be glad to hear," I say.

Elias smiles, but Caelan wears a mock grimace. "Ugh, Shan, don't give him more of an excuse to get into demon physics bullshit."

"I think it's fascinating."

"You wouldn't if you had to live through it."

I pause for a long moment, carefully weighing my next words. "Could I live through it? I mean, I'm not saying I want to, but is it possible? That I could go to your realms one day, like how you can take me through the abyss?"

"No," Elias replies immediately, and I wince. He seems to realize the refusal came across more harshly than intended because he softens his tone as he explains further. "Not simply because our realms are... inhospitable. Although, that would be reason enough to keep you away. I don't wish any needless harm to befall you. But you know we're trapped here now, and even

if that were not the case, it's not possible for humans to cross dimensions the same way we do."

"And trust us, the few who've ever tried have severely regretted it. Your kind don't come out the same from that shit."

Right. Caelan did say 'it drives them insane,' was it?

Elias considers the matter. "Again. Such things are difficult to explain when you lack so much of the fundamental understanding."

"Then—"

"Explain," Elias finishes for me. He tilts his head and gives me a small smile. "I will endeavor to do so, dear. That was always my intention for tonight. Do you remember what I told you previously about souls?"

"They're... like energy, defined by a unique frequency?"

He nods. "That is the exceptionally simplistic version. Perhaps if..." Elias pauses for a moment, then tilts his head. I can't tell exactly what he's doing, but something in the atmosphere shifts, a slight waver in the air around us. Like he's extended his glamour further.

I understand why when he curls his shadows around his fingers, creating a three-dimensional diagram in the air. I immediately recognize it as a sine wave.

"You're familiar with this way of graphing soundwaves, I presume?"

I laugh. "Yeah, I *did* take physics at some point in high school."

"Then imagine this is the energy of a soul. This is the frequency that defines it. The magnitude of the energy can vary." He creates another black line in the air, another sine wave over the top of the first with a slightly greater amplitude. "But the frequency and wavelength are the important factors in defining the soul and do not change."

"What causes changes in amplitude?"

"Lots of stuff," Caelan says with a shrug. "Your energy levels change throughout the day, right? When you're excited about something, tired, horny..."

I snort. Of course, that would be one of his examples.

“Consistent minor variations are natural with mood and circumstances. Extreme changes occur rarely and are most often detrimental. Excessive high energy often occurs in situations of desperation or upon traumatic death.” Elias pauses and considers. “Your concept of ghosts and hauntings, those usually occur when something terrible has happened, correct? In most cases, the haunting is simply an echo of a soul whose energy spiked high enough to destabilize the normal limitations and confinement of a linear timeline and persists like an imprint left on the area.”

My eyebrows raise as I process that. Any in-depth conversations I have with them are a trip. Elias is casually just throwing out an explanation for a large portion of supernatural occurrences in the middle of an entirely unrelated conversation. It makes me pause to do a mental double-take.

“And then the opposite. For example, if the amplitude were to decrease to the point of causing a flatline. What do you think would happen?”

“They would die?” I suggest slowly.

“Worse. Death of the body, as you understand it, is not the same as death of the soul. Matter and energy are interchangeable. If the soul remains intact, that energy can continue to interact with the world, regardless of the physical state. Depending on the realm they favor, many of what you’d consider demons have no physical state at all. No. To have the energy depleted to the point of losing the frequency will cause the very soul to cease to exist. It will dissolve into nothing and be erased entirely.”

It’s a lot to wrap my head around. Elias is right that I really don’t have any true understanding of the matter. But from the sound of it, and from the seriousness of his tone, it sounds like a terrible fate.

“That’s... awful.”

“I’ve seen Elias do it,” Caelan comments idly.

“What?”

“*Caelan*,” Elias reprimands.

“I mean, just saying. You have.”

Elias sighs. “True enough. I prefer not to, but the nature of my abilities includes being able to manipulate and drain the energy from others, up to and including the point of absolute destruction.”

“Wow,” I mutter. Of course, I knew they were powerful. They don’t tend to display it so much here. There’s no need to, I suppose, but from the snippets I’ve gathered regarding their capabilities and former high standing in wherever they came from, I had figured as much. But the understanding of exactly what Elias is capable of is something else. *When he said that if I had known him back then, he would have consumed me... is that what he meant?*

I decide not to dwell on that too long.

Not that I have much of a chance to. Our food arrives at that point and serves as a welcome distraction.

There’s a small flurry of activity as Elias waves his hand and dismisses the shadows he was utilizing. The table is cleared, and we work out each of our orders. I end up with two plates in front of me. A smaller plate holds my sushi and a large dinner plate has a heaping of thinly sliced greens surrounded by rich red tuna drizzled with a chunky brown sauce.

It might have been expensive, but *damn* does this place make some good sushi. The salmon feels like it could just melt in my mouth, rich and buttery. I only ordered two pieces, a little too aware of the cost to ask for more given I was having another full dish with it as well, but I almost regret that now.

Caelan, being the absolute shit he is, forgoes using the chopsticks as they’re meant to be used and simply stabs right through his sushi and eats it like that. He stares Elias straight in the eye as he does so, and his infuriating grin proves he’s only doing it to annoy Elias.

Or *trying* to annoy Elias. Elias does school his expression into one of exasperation, but behind it, I can see he’s trying not to laugh.

I have no such qualms regarding holding back and end up giggling uncontrollably.

It's not actually that funny, but I've drained about half of my cocktail by this point, and it's going to my head.

The main course is almost even more delicious. The tuna sashimi is every bit as lovely as the salmon, but the sauce absolutely makes it.

"This is incredible," I say with utter sincerity. "Thank you for bringing us here."

Caelan grins, snorting a quiet laugh. "I thought it was dudes where their stomach is the quickest way to their heart."

"That's a dumb saying anyway."

"It is," Caelan agrees. "Everyone knows the quickest way is with a knife between their fourth and fifth rib."

Elias shakes his head, but a smirk pulls at his lips.

It's only toward the end of the meal, food and cocktail finished now, that I remember we were in the middle of a conversation before being thoroughly distracted. Elias was trying to explain... something. It ended up being such a long-winded explanation that I can't even remember what the original question was.

Something to do with souls, obviously. I frown into my empty glass. Frequency, amplitude, energy. There was something about some demons being nothing but energy, no physical form at all. Depending on their dimension. Dimensions...

Humans couldn't travel to other dimensions. That was it. At least, that was what had started the whole conversation.

"Elias?" I ask. "You were talking about something to do with souls before we started eating."

"Ah, that's right. Did you still want to learn?"

"Of course."

"You got as far as talking about amplitude," Caelan supplies helpfully, his mouth still full.

"I recall," Elias says. With our food finished, Elias moves his and my

plates to the side to make room for him to create his liquid shadow diagram anew. “We’ve covered this as a one-dimensional example. But the reality is far more complex.”

I immediately wonder if bringing this up again was the best idea after all. The alcohol has my head feeling a little fuzzy. Too late for second thoughts, though, as Elias is already diving straight back in as if the interruption never happened.

Elias draws a cylinder in the air, the shadow stretched out like faint fog to leave it transparent. The original sine wave cuts through the center on a vertical axis as if the cylinder had been sliced in half. And the face of that halfway cut is decorated with a squiggle.

Then he circles his finger, and the sine wave rotates, leaving multiple halfway cuts intersecting like the spokes of a wheel.

“Souls are far from one-dimensional. If that singular frequency I drew exists on a simple *XY* plane, there are also countless planes in addition to that. As if...” Elias traces over the ends of each cut crossing the circular face of the cylinder, “... each of these lines is another plane. Multiple frequencies, multiples planes, all interacting together to form a singular cohesive entity, the exact number is near infinite. Every fragment of energy making up a soul carries that same signature.”

I blink and take a deep breath. “Okay.”

He smiles, seeing he’s reaching the edge of where I can follow. “Even this is simplified, but you start to understand the complexity.”

I nod. Complex is right.

“Now, the original question was about why you couldn’t visit other dimensions, correct?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“There is a certain level of alignment required to harmonize with and exist in a dimension. There needs to be...” Elias pauses and frowns. “Hmm... the analogy falls apart somewhat, but there needs to be a suitable matching

frequency between the soul and the energy level of the dimension. Like a radio station, perhaps.”

“Radio stations,” I repeat slowly. “I can see that. So... the channel would represent a dimension, right? And you must turn the dial to match so you can access it.” I trace my finger over the cylinder he’s created. It feels like cold static beneath my touch, just like when his shadows brush against me, then I look up questioningly. “The soul is the dial?”

Elias hums. “Yes. I suppose that works.” He highlights one line on the wheel, turning it to a burning ember for a moment. “In this orientation, if we say this is the natural state of the soul, the dial is tuned to a particular dimensional channel. The energy of the soul must change orientation to align to a new channel.” This is followed by him rotating the cylinder in midair. The brightened line fades, and a new one highlights.

“All right. I get it, I think.” I don’t quite. *How can a soul change orientation? What does that mean for the person involved?* But close enough.

Caelan snorts from across the table. “You two are precious, but you’re giving me a headache just watching you.”

“We’re almost done,” Elias says. “You asked why humans can’t cross dimensions? This is why. You, beholden to your material realm and with material perceptions, cannot ‘turn the dial,’ as it were. And trying to force a dial to turn when it is designed to stay in one position...”

Caelan makes a snapping noise with his fingers. “It’ll break.”

“Oh.”

“If a dimensional crossing is forced, this frequency signature of the soul is forced entirely out of alignment. In simple terms, yes, they break. The energy becomes deranged and unrecognizable. They would not come out of it the same person.”

I swallow. “Okay. So. No dimensional crossing.”

Elias laughs lightly. “Quite. Even the abyss is dubious. That would be akin to twisting the dial just the slightest amount, enough to slip from your

‘channel’ into the static and white noise at the edges of it. Do you understand now why I don’t like you in there for too long?”

“Yeah.” Suddenly, his overprotectiveness makes a lot more sense, and it makes my chest tighten to realize the danger I could have been in without them. “Yeah, I do.”

“Any more questions while we choose dessert?”

I don’t know. My mind is already spinning a little just from that much. So, I bury my head into the menu and consider safer options, like what dessert sounds most appetizing.

I want to know more. It’s *fascinating*, and Elias is doing his best to explain in a way I can understand. He’s so damn patient about it, but it’s a lot to process.

“Can... I have the pistachio soufflé?” I ask.

Caelan grins. “That’s my kind of question.” He purrs, then leans over to look upside down at the dessert menu with me.

Elias leaves the matter for the time being, allowing me the space to think while we organize dessert and another round of drinks. The thought comes slowly, drifting hazily through my already overloaded mind, and I’m not even sure Elias will want to answer, but I do have something I want to know.

I wait until the next drinks come and sip at my second cocktail for courage. “If it’s all right to ask,” I start hesitantly, “How is it possible for souls to fuse?”

Elias smiles again, but it’s colder now. More withdrawn, a little sorrowful maybe. “Ah. Of course.”

“I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that.”

“Are you asking for our specifics—” Elias begins, but I shake my head.

“No. Just the general theory of it is fine.”

I already know enough and don’t need them to explain all the traumatic details of what happened to them. But I want a basic understanding of the concept because, I admit, it is still bewildering to me.

“Hmm... in that case,” Elias says. He pauses to consider, but Caelan interrupts first.

“That one ain’t complicated,” he says. “You guys have nuclear fusion, right? Slam two things together at a high enough speed or energy level, and shit gets all stuck together or whatever.”

I can’t imagine souls colliding at high speed at all, and my eyebrows raise. “High energy?”

“It is an exceptionally rare occurrence, but yes. The circumstances would have to be perfectly aligned, with all components in the same extremely high-energy state. And then entanglement may occur. Frequencies become warped. Maybe not all frequencies. You’ve seen the complexity of a full soul. But a small fragment of the frequency planes may realign to match that of another,” Elias concludes firmly.

That’s as much as either of them have to say on the matter. And, honestly, maybe I’m a little glad for that. I don’t want to sour the night by thinking about it too much. I recall what Elias said at the start of our meal, about high-energy states. That those usually occurred in the worst circumstances—violent murders, pain, despair. That fits with what I know about the circumstances under which it happened for them, and that doesn’t bear dwelling on right now. I push that firmly aside for the time being.

Besides, the second cocktail may not have been the best idea. I was already feeling mildly tipsy with the first. Another, plus the depth of the conversation, is making it difficult for me to focus.

Dessert arrives, and I decide to let the matter drop entirely. Souls, dimensions, all of it. I’ve heard more than enough for one night, and I just want to enjoy spending time with them without picking their brains over the sorts of things that will give me an existential crisis if I try to look too deeply into them.

The dessert is just as good as the main course, but I’m distracted now for multiple reasons. Caelan ordered a dessert bento selection of various

chocolate-themed fondants and gelato, and he catches me eyeing it up.

With a grin, Caelan feeds me some of the rich fondant from his spoon, and, without particularly meaning to, I stare him straight in the eye as I slowly lick the spoon entirely clean. Caelan cackles, but I can see the lust stirring in his eyes.

I glance at Elias. He was the one *trying* to make sure we behaved decently. “Sorry... um.”

He may have told me not to touch without permission, but the same doesn’t apply to him. He meets my gaze, amused, and smiles as he slides his arm around my waist.

It’s only a small affectionate gesture, but shit, I shouldn’t have had two cocktails. I’m tipsy now, and the alcohol makes me feel far too warm. Maybe it’s the combination of the alcohol and the company, but I can’t help shivering slightly at Elias’ touch, desperately craving more.

He’s still talking, but all I can focus on is the movement of his lips and how I want them against mine.

Now that the serious discussion is over, they’re more inclined to be affectionate and teasing. Caelan finally takes advantage of his position opposite me to caress the side of my leg with his foot. His arms are crossed, and he’s casually leaning on the table, looking for all the world like he’s not doing anything, even as he makes me squirm. And Elias’ hold on me, I can feel every movement so much more intensely, even the slightest increase in pressure as he says something and gently squeezes my waist.

My face feels far too warm.

“Are you drunk, Shannon?” Elias asks, noticing as well.

I shift in my seat. “Not *drunk* drunk. Maybe kinda tipsy.”

Tipsy and horny. Goddammit.

“Was there, uh... hard liquor in those cocktails, like whiskey or rum or something?”

“Rum, I believe, and a distilled rose hip liquor. Why?”

Ah. It's a rare occurrence for me to react to alcohol by getting turned on, but the small handful of times I *have* noticed that effect, it's always been with strong shit. And that cocktail was potent.

It takes everything I have not to moan when Elias brushes his thumb over my lips under the guise of removing a stray spot of chocolate fondant. He chuckles, seeing the glazed look in my eyes.

"Please," I beg softly. "Take me home?"

Elias kisses my forehead. "A little patience, dear."

Dammit.

And to make matters worse, Caelan *knows* and is teasing me on purpose. He won't touch, Elias' warning glower is enough to keep him from that for the time being, but his crooked, heated smirk alone is enough to make arousal flood my gut.

"I can't wait to get you outta here," he purrs lowly. "It's a pretty dress you got, but it'd look so much better torn off you."

"Dammit, Caelan," I groan, squirming in my seat.

Caelan laughs. "You're adorable when you're so easy to work up."

How quickly a few drinks and a little attention from them can turn things around. I'm turned on, needy and already feeling myself grow slick. A little uncoordinated from the alcohol, perhaps, but being more malleable, unable to resist them at all if they were to manhandle me, only makes the whole situation even hotter.

I need them to take me home, pin me up against the wall, and take advantage of me. Not that it's really taking advantage of me if I'm the one begging them to do it, but still.

I love to surrender control and love it even more when they *take it* from me.

Elias' hand trails from around my waist to rest on the top of my thigh, squeezing in warning, and it's hard not to whimper.

It feels like forever for the waiter to bring the bill and for Elias to

exchange pleasantries as he pays. My overheated mind is whirring rapidly, my imagination running overtime. I'm already picturing everything I want to do when we get out of here.

Elias' hands all over me, Caelan's mouth leaving stinging kisses and love bites all the way down my chest and stomach. The way they'd pin me down and spread my legs. How it would feel to be filled and fucked by them. The way I'd arch and scream for them, beg them for more.

I feel hot and tipsy, and I *want* them.

I speak lowly, aware of Elias' need for propriety and not wanting anyone else to hear. My voice comes out rough and slurred. "The second we're out of here, I need your cock," I inform him.

Elias laughs, a quiet, deep sound. Amused, but there's a flash of lust in his eyes and that smirk that makes my knees weak. He might tease and make me wait while we're here, but I don't doubt he'll give me what I need. Eventually. *And when he does...*

He takes his time standing, offering me his hand. I'm grateful for that. Between the alcohol and the heels, I'm not sure how my balance will fare.

Not too badly, as it turns out. A little wobbly as I first stand, but no worse than when I was first getting used to the heels. I knew I wasn't that drunk.

Caelan toys with my hair, standing far too close as the three of us leave the restaurant. The moment we're outside, a few yards deep into the dark driveway leading to the restaurant's parking lot, his grip tightens around the back of my neck.

"You really are just begging for it, ain't ya?" he mutters darkly.

"Ah," is all I can reply. I'm far too into having my neck played with at the best of times, and the way his claws dig into me...

He leans in, his low voice whispering against my ear, "You don't see your expression, doll. How fuckin' flushed and needy you look. It's driving me crazy."

"D-dammit. Caelan..."

His hands grip my hips instead, and he shoves me up against the wall. “I want to pin you down and fuck you right here.”

“Still in public, Caelan,” Elias reminds him. Just because the driveway is poorly lit doesn’t mean other people won’t exit the restaurant at any time.

“Home, then. Now,” Caelan demands.

None of us have any complaints about that.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

With Caelan holding me the entire time, when he's so damn close to me, I barely even notice the unsettling slip through the abyss this time. I can't possibly care about that.

He's close enough I can feel the heat of his skin, the warmth of his breath, and God, I need him. It won't be close enough until he's in me.

The next moment, we're back in their home, in the master bedroom, and I squeak in delight as Caelan shoves me up against the wall all over again.

His lips meet mine, and I throw my arms around his neck as he devours me. *Fuck*. The things his tongue does to me, the way he ravages my mouth, makes my core ache. His hands are all over me, hungrily grasping, and I can feel his sharp nails through my dress.

The dress. Stupid thing is in the way. Caelan seems to agree, and with an irritated growl, he yanks the long skirt up to my waist.

Then his hands are on my bare thighs, teeth tugging at my bottom lip. He pulls away just long enough to drink in the sight of me, his eyes practically glowing with lust.

"You wanna get fucked right up against the wall?"

"Oh, *God*." I moan. "Yes. Yes, fuck... please do that."

I don't give a shit about foreplay, not like this. I'm too turned on and desperate, plenty wet already, and I just *need* him.

Caelan's grin widens into something feral as he hooks his fingers into my panties. He doesn't even bother taking them off, just tears through them as if they are made of tissue paper.

I gasp and groan in protest because I don't have many nice panties, but the action is too fucking hot for me to care much.

With my dress shoved up as it is and panties gone, I'm entirely naked from the waist down. And it's not fair that I'm so helpless and exposed when Caelan's still fully dressed.

My fingers fumble desperately with the buttons of his shirt, tugging them undone as Caelan kisses me. His fingers slide between my legs, thumb lightly rubbing my clit, and it's a good thing he has me pinned in place with the hard length of his body because my knees would have given way otherwise.

Between the two of us, we manage to yank his shirt off and toss it carelessly aside. Then Caelan undoes his fly and pushes his jeans down his thighs.

Hard. Of course, he's hard. I cling to him with one arm tight around his shoulders while my other hand ventures lower between us to take him in my hand.

Caelan groans, a low, glitchy, needy noise. His cock is hot and heavy in my grip, head slick with pre-cum.

"You want it, doll?" He growls. The muscles of his stomach quiver like he's fighting every instinct to buck up into my hand.

"Yes," I plead.

"Elias."

Elias? Oh, right, of course, he's still there, watching us, his eyes heavy with desire but otherwise allowing Caelan his turn. He passes a condom over—hardly necessary after all this time, perhaps, but two forms of birth control are safer than one—and I roll it on for Caelan, reveling in the way my touch makes him jerk and shiver.

As soon as I'm done, Caelan grips my wrist and pins it up against the

wall. His other hand grips my thigh hard enough that I'm certain his nails will leave marks, and he lifts me off the floor.

I yelp and cling to him, my legs wrapping instinctively around his waist, and the position has the head of his cock rubbing just right against my wet, aching core.

He doesn't stop to ask, and I don't stop to beg. He just thrusts up into me, and I cry out as his cock stretches me open.

Caelan's rough. His hands claw at me and toy with my breasts, his teeth sink into my throat, his cock finds a steady, hard rhythm to fuck me. And it feels amazing.

He's not quiet about it at all—low growls, sharp gasps, the way he moans in the back of his throat as I clench down around him. And there's no way I can be quiet about it either. Not like this, not when he's fucking me up against the wall like a goddamn beast.

"A-aahh! Oh, God, *God*, Caelan." I moan desperately. This is exactly what I needed, and the pleasure floods through me, making me lose my mind. He's going to make me come—the manhandling, the rough treatment, the way he pounds into me, so rough but so good. It's more than enough to push me to the edge.

"You don't even know..." he groans, "... how amazing you feel."

Caelan kisses me hard again, tongue fucking my mouth just as thoroughly as his cock is fucking my cunt.

His hips jerk, rhythm faltering. Close. He's close, and so am I.

He shoves in deep and stays buried to the hilt, his cock bucking and grinding inside me as he reaches his peak. I clutch him even tighter, my back arching against the wall and thighs tensing. Caelan reaches between us, stroking my clit again, and that's all it takes for me to come too.

I gasp his name senselessly, moaning as I clench and quiver around him with the force of my orgasm, and he moans in turn as I milk his cock.

Gradually, he lets me slide back down to the floor. I stay leaning against

the wall, not trusting my trembling legs to hold me up.

When Caelan pulls his cock free, I whine at the loss. Even though I've just come, I still feel so overheated, heady, and achingly empty now that he's not inside me anymore.

But, of course, he's not the only one who has a claim on me.

The moment Caelan draws away even slightly, Elias is there to replace him. On the surface, it seems like he's still fairly composed, but the absolute hunger in his gaze as he traps me against the wall again makes my breath catch. His eyes are almost pure black with want. With jealousy. It's been killing him to stand back and watch Caelan have his way with me.

"My turn," Elias says, voice low and reverberating in that way it does when his more human façade starts to crack.

"O-ohh, fuck." He's not even done anything yet, but he's radiating that intensity and sheer *power* that makes me desperately want to surrender my whole existence to him.

Elias isn't rough and impatient the same way Caelan is. His touch is slow, purposeful, and so damn possessive. He undoes the zipper of my dress and finally pulls it off me completely, then drags me against him.

I clutch at his shirt as he picks me up by the back of my thighs and carries me over to the bed, tossing me down onto the covers with a smirk. Immediately, he's all over me.

Elias settles between my thighs and caresses up my body with firm touches and hot, open-mouthed kisses. I arch up and moan as his lips find my peaked nipples, tongue curling and flicking against each in turn.

He's almost entirely dressed still, aside from his jacket, while I'm completely naked and pinned beneath him. Or almost completely naked. I still have the heels on, but it's not worth undoing the straps on them at this point. Besides, there's something incredibly hot about getting fucked into the bed wearing nothing but my high heels.

I reach up to try and undo the buttons of his shirt like I did with Caelan,

but Elias grips my wrists and pins them back down on the bed.

“I don’t believe I gave you permission to touch yet,” he says, and his voice alone makes heat pulse through me.

I whimper quietly. I *need* him. I want to touch him so badly, but I obey. I’ll always obey. I can’t resist anything he says when he orders me around in that tone.

Elias’ smirk widens. He releases my wrists, but in the place of his hands, he curls his shadows around me instead.

They’re almost impossible to describe. He’s not solidifying them into anything tangible, although I’m certain he could simply form rope out of them if he wanted to. But he leaves them as they are—ethereal, smoke-like coils that are somehow solid enough I can’t pull away from them. They feel like cold, soft static.

He binds my wrists above my head with his shadows, then sits back on his heels to take his shirt off, and I can only watch and stare.

Elias chuckles at my expression. “Still so needy, even after having already come on Caelan’s cock.”

I squirm. He’s not wrong. I’m still so wet and desperate for it, and how could I not be when he’s looking down at me like that? Like he wants to devour me, claim me. So much heat in his eyes, yet still with just enough control to hold back.

“Elias...” I beg softly.

He strips to the waist, then undoes his trousers and removes them. I moan as he draws his cock out, hard and leaking. He’s been waiting this whole time, watching Caelan and me. No wonder.

I bite my lip, unable to take my eyes off him as he rolls on a condom. I want that, *need* it inside me. Need Elias to claim me. There’s a feral promise underlying the darkness in his eyes and his unyielding grip on me. He’s going to ruin me.

“Tell me you want this.”

I swallow back a whimper. “I want it! Elias, Sir, please. You have no idea how badly I need you.”

He leans back in again, pinning me to the bed with every inch of his body. There’s no clothing in the way this time, just his skin against mine. I can feel his breath ghosting against my throat, teeth grazing at my pulse point.

“Tell me you’re *mine*.”

So possessive. But I adore his possessiveness when I’m pinned beneath him like this, bound by his shadows, helpless under his intensity. He makes me feel like he owns me, and there’s nothing I want more in my existence than to belong to him. Belong to them.

“I’m yours,” I breathe out. Quiet but sincere.

He thrusts into me, and I cry out.

I arch up against him, rocking my hips to meet his. *God. Damn. He fills me so good.* I want to take him as deep as I can. Slick and clenching around his cock, my whole body trembles with the way he pounds into me.

I’m going to be feeling it tomorrow, with both being so rough, but for the time being, it absolutely thrills me to the core.

Elias’ power flickers around him like back at the gala, the way he gets when his mood is intense. The room seems to narrow and darken around him until all I can focus on is him. Elias’ eyes lock with mine, his hands grasping at my waist, his cock filling me up and fucking me until pleasure wracks my body. He’s going to leave those black, shadowy bruises on me again at this rate.

I moan, brokenly gasping out his names—Elias and Sir and Master.

He tightens his grip around me and rolls me over until he’s sitting on the edge of the bed and I’m in his lap. My still-bound wrists hook over his head, wrapping around his neck to steady myself as he thrusts up into me in this new position.

“Aa-ahh!” *Fuck.* The angle like this, the head of his cock is grinding

against my sweet spot every time he slams into me, so deep, and it's going to undo me. "Elias... feels so good." I groan.

"Good," he pants in return, voice rough. "You take my cock so well, don't you, love?"

"Mmm." I bury my face into the crook of his neck, feeling like a wreck. Face flushed and eyes glazed as he fucks me out of my mind.

Then there's another touch against my back, fingers trailing down my spine and lips pressing against my shoulder blades.

Elias growls, and it's the single most animalistic sound I've ever heard him make.

And possibly also the hottest.

"Back off, Caelan," he warns, teeth bared. His cock slams home into me again, even harder than before, and I nearly scream. He's not going to let me go until he's done with me.

"Don't be a dick."

"You had your turn."

"We're meant to *share*. And we could," he suggests.

Elias slows his pace at least a little, and when I glance up, I find him staring at Caelan with narrowed eyes. And Caelan's smiling back at him with a shit-eating grin.

I only realize what Caelan is implying when his hard cock presses against my ass.

"Think you can take us both, Shan?"

Oh. He means—

I bite my lip, a shudder of absolute lust running through me. Enough to make me clench down around Elias, and he hisses, bucking up into me.

"Ye-es!" I gasp, voice cracking. *That's, oh, God. That's hot. That's hot, and absolutely filthy.* And I'm tipsy and so turned on, but I am down with taking both of their cocks at once.

Elias huffs, reaching around me to grab Caelan by the throat. "Wait your

damn turn,” he says, but with less vitriol than before.

Then he grips my hips again, pulling me down as he fucks me, and white-hot pleasure bursts behind my eyelids.

“Oh!”

“Good girl,” he mutters. He fucks me like he owns me too, chasing his own orgasm now and murmuring filthy praise in my ear as he does so. “So hot and tight for me, darling. You are mine.”

“Yes, yes,” I agree senselessly. “Yours, Elias.”

“Ours,” Caelan corrects from behind me, sinking his teeth into my shoulder.

Elias tenses beneath me, groaning deeply as his cock bucks inside me, and I shiver and moan at the sensation.

Caelan laughs quietly and murmurs against my ear. “Damn. I’ll never tire of watching his face when he comes.”

I hadn’t even been looking, too lost in my own pleasure, but Caelan’s right. Elias is gorgeous, the violent bliss in his expression as he lets go.

I’m not supposed to touch, but I can’t resist leaning in to kiss him.

Elias kisses me back, briefly but hotly, before smacking my thigh hard enough to make me yelp and squirm.

“Disobedient,” he accuses hoarsely.

“I’m sorry…”

“You mean well, dear, I know. But one day, you’ll have to learn to listen.” Elias smirks, resting his forehead against mine. He’s breathing heavily in the aftermath of his orgasm, still inside me. It feels like he’s barely softened at all. *Goddamn demon stamina.*

Caelan’s smirking as well. I can feel it in the shape of his lips as he presses them against the back of my neck. “Still good for more, babe?” he asks.

Elias’ hands slide over my hips and grip my ass. “Mmm… we’re not done with you yet.”

I squirm. Elias' cock is just there *in* me, and I can't get any stimulation when he's not moving. It makes it so hard to focus. *I was so close again, just a little more, and I could—*

I take a shaky breath. "You wanted to, um... both of you?"

"Elias fucking your cunt while I fuck your ass," Caelan confirms, a low crackling purr in his voice. "Or vice versa. I don't really care."

Yeah. That's what I thought. I can only groan needily in response.

Caelan wraps a hand around my throat and pulls me back against him, tilting my head back so he can thoroughly kiss me again. Elias' shadow bindings fade from my wrists, and he kisses my neck before sliding his cock out of me and moving away to get fresh condoms and lube.

I might have been disappointed, but it's hard to worry too much about it when I have Caelan making out with me. I can feel his cock pressing into the small of my back, and my stomach clenches in heated anticipation for what they have planned.

Caelan runs his hand over my thigh and down my leg, then chuckles lowly. "The hell you still got these on for?" he asks, having found my high heels.

"Straps," I mutter distractedly. "Couldn't be bothered."

He snorts. "Fair enough." He turns me around on the bed despite his words, so I'm facing him, sitting on the edge like Elias was, and he kneels to undo my shoes for me.

"You don't have to—"

"They're just gonna get in the way. I don't want that shit gouging my thigh out when I'm trying to have my way with you, thanks."

I laugh at the idea of that. But as soon as Caelan's done tossing my heels aside, he's back on me in an instant, and my laughter dies on my lips.

He kisses me until I'm breathless all over again. One of his hands finds its way between my legs, and I immediately buck into the contact with a moan. Already so worked up, and just his fingers teasingly stroking over my soaked,

used entrance is enough to have me quivering with need again.

“Caelan,” I whine.

He grins wickedly and pulls away. “You can come when we’re both inside you.”

I can feel myself clench again at the thought. “I’m gonna come just thinking about it,” I mutter, and Caelan cackles in delight.

The bed dips beside me as Elias returns. Caelan lazily rolls over onto his back and pulls me on top of him, dragging me down so he can continue making out with me. I realize the purpose of the change of position when Elias’ hands run over my ass again. Far more purposefully this time.

“Relax, doll,” Caelan murmurs between kisses. “It’s fun, I promise. You think I don’t take Elias’ cock up my ass on a regular basis?”

“Do you have to say it like that?” I mumble, the complaint fading into a groan as the first of Elias’ fingers sink into me, slick with lube.

Despite Caelan’s directions on the matter, I’m already fairly relaxed. The alcohol is probably helping a lot with that. There’s a moment of tension at the initial penetration, but then I melt against Caelan as Elias slowly works me open.

It feels weird at first, but not bad. Between everything else and how turned on I am, how close I was to coming to start with, being kind of drunk, Caelan’s nails gently clawing down my back while his mouth works hungrily against mine, it’s easy for me to start getting into it.

Enough so that I find myself rocking back against Elias’ fingers, face flushing. He’s taking his time, stretching me open and working me up to it, but by the time he has three fingers in me, I’m needily begging for more.

“Want you.” I gasp, only just managing to get the words out between Caelan’s biting kisses. “Want your cock, *please*.”

Elias slides his fingers free, wipes the excess lube off on a small hand towel, then presses a kiss to the small of my back, right over the scar of Caelan’s name, and pulls me away from Caelan by my hips.

“Come and take it then,” he offers wickedly, sitting back. Almost entranced, I crawl into his lap.

I sink down onto his cock with a heady moan, and Elias wraps his arms around me and guides me to lay on top of him. Then Caelan’s behind me, spreading my thighs wider, and my breath catches.

He doesn’t put it in me immediately. No, he has to be a goddamn tease first. He kisses the inside of my thighs, leaving stinging love bites and making me squirm. Elias won’t move. His arms wrapped around my waist are like an iron brace, and I’m right back to where I was before being filled by him but unable to get any stimulation. It’s driving me crazy.

“Caelan!” I plead.

Caelan laughs at my desperation. “You’re so adorable. Wanting both of us so bad.”

“*Please.*”

Elias tosses Caelan another condom and the lube, and I hear him pop open the lid of the latter.

Elias kisses me as I shiver. “Remember to relax.”

“How can I relax when I’m so fucking horny, and you won’t *move*?”

The next kiss of his is rougher in admonishment, biting at my lips. “Patience, dear. Do you really want us to rush you on this?”

I suppose not, but I’m so *ready*, and I need it. I groan in relief as the slicked head of Caelan’s cock brushes against my ass, then he sinks into me slowly and—*fuck*.

It feels like I am being split open, stretched so wide to take him. And I’m already full of Elias as well, and for a moment, I whimper, not sure there’s even room. Caelan pulls back, then sinks in deeper, gradually working me open until he’s buried all the way inside me.

A helpless moan bursts from my lips. They’re not even moving, and I’m so *full* that I feel like I could break. Elias’ arms around me and Caelan’s hands stroking over my trembling thighs are the only things holding me

together. I feel the heat on my face, flushed a brilliant red.

It's filthy. So full, so stretched open for them, both of their cocks in me at once.

"Oh, *God*," I pant. "E-Elias, Caelan, fuck..."

"That's it, darling." Elias purrs, his voice a deep rumble. I can feel it vibrating where I'm lying against his chest. "You're so good, taking both of us."

"Such a perfect little whore."

Elias levels a glower at Caelan for being crass about me, but dammit, it makes me clench around them, and I whimper.

Caelan slowly pulls out, then thrusts back into me. "Oh, what, you like that?" he says, sounding breathless himself. "Hearing what a slut you are? Being filled up and fucked by two guys at once."

His cock slams home, and I cry out. *God, it feels so much more intense like this.* I can feel the way their cocks grind together inside me, so full I can barely take it, but I love it at the same time.

"No, worse. Being fucked by two *demons* at once."

His next thrust makes my eyes roll back, and that's enough. I was already so on edge from being fucked by Elias. My arousal hadn't abated at all while they were prepping me, and now with Caelan talking like *that*.

I scream for them as I come.

Elias chuckles. "Already, dear? Do you find it that enjoyable?"

I can only moan in response. *Yes. God, yes, it's fucking good.* I was already on edge, but even so, I *love* being filled up by both of them.

They don't stop. They don't give me a chance to recover. They start to move, not the easiest, with both of them, but Caelan fucks me from behind while Elias stays buried deep, thrusting sharply, but it's almost *better* that way because Elias' cock ends up grinding right against the perfect spot inside me, and it has me losing my mind all over again.

They're driving me immediately back toward another orgasm without

even a breather from my first.

I cling to Elias' shoulders, and, this time, he doesn't stop me. I'm being loud, I can tell, but so are they. The way Caelan groans as he thrusts into me, murmuring filthy praise about how tight I am, how good it feels to fuck me. Elias' low moans, his panted breaths, and the way color rises to his washed-out skin.

Elias wraps his fingers around my throat and forces me up, making me arch, and Caelan swears behind me as the shift in my hips makes me tighten even more around them both. I let my head loll forward, eyes half-closed and lips helplessly parted. He's not choking me, not quite, but from the smirk he's wearing, it's clear he's figured out that having my neck played with is an instant weakness for me.

"Mmm... Elias..."

He squeezes, just gently, but even that is enough to make me moan and heat pulse in my core. "You asked for this last night too. Is this another kink of yours you failed to mention, love?"

"M-maybe," I gasp. I don't know. Maybe it's just what Elias does to me. I can't think about it while I'm getting fucked between them like their little pet, my mind melted with the pleasure.

His other hand trails down my chest, cupping my breasts and kneading them until I whimper for him. And Caelan grips my hips, nails digging deep red crescents into my flesh, holding me still as he pounds steadily into me.

I'm so overheated, and my skin is flushed and slick with sweat. Head swimming, the combination of alcohol and sheer overwhelming pleasure reduces me to absolute helplessness between them. Begging and moaning for them like a whore.

"Fuck," Caelan groans. "Good, pet. Such a... *ah*, good little toy."

Elias makes that low, possessive growl again. "*Ours*. No one else can ever have you."

He drags me back down and kisses me deeply, swallowing my cries as I

come again. My body trembles with the force of it, heat flooding through me, and the way I clench and squirm is enough to drag them over the edge too.

I'm too lost in the bliss, the intensity of it, to follow the exact details. All I know is that it's not long before Caelan comes, then Elias soon after, shallowly fucking into me as they work through their orgasms until they're completely spent. We end up collapsed in a pile of sweaty, tangled limbs together.

For a long time, none of us speak. I don't think I can make any sounds other than a moan. We just lay against each other. I'm still on top of Elias but Caelan pulls out of me and flops to the side, one arm draped over me, and his legs tangled with Elias' as he rides out the aftershocks. Our breaths finally even out, pulses slowing.

They recover far quicker than I do and litter me with soft kisses and soothing touches while I'm still panting and trembling.

"Fuck," I mutter.

"Good fuck?" Caelan asks, grinning widely. He damn well knows it was a good fuck.

I groan and swat lightly at him. That's about as much as I can move. I feel so completely blissed out and boneless with satisfaction, lying limply in Elias' arms.

"You did so well, Shannon," Elias praises.

Even after just staying like that for several minutes, Elias rubbing small circles against my back while Caelan takes my hand and kisses it, it's clear I'm not making much progress.

"I'm done," I mumble, slurred and exhausted. Between being both kind of drunk and very thoroughly fucked, I am so done for the evening. "I'm just gonna... pass out."

"Can you stay awake long enough for a bath?" Elias asks.

I doubt it. Elias scoops me up anyway, and I lay against his chest, utterly limp. I'm only half-conscious through the whole thing. Elias runs just enough

warm water to cover us, washing us clean of sweat and cum. He can tell I'm still completely out of it and doesn't bother lingering, just cleaning me up enough to make sure I'll be comfortable. I will probably be grateful for it when I have enough of a mind to process the fact.

The next thing I know is that I'm back in bed, dry and warm beneath the covers, and Caelan and Elias are curled up on either side of me. I'm vaguely aware of their voices, but I'm far too gone to be able to make sense of anything as needless as words.

One of them is holding my hand, and I squeeze gently to let them know I'm okay. I'm good. I'm so good. Floaty and hazy.

The brush of their lips against mine is the last thing I'm aware of before I pass out.

Exhausted and thoroughly satisfied, I sleep like the dead.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

It's late morning when I finally wake. I stir to find myself alone in the middle of the bed, with sunlight streaming in brightly through the curtains, high in the sky.

A groan escapes my lips as I roll over. Sore.

Honestly, I'm nowhere as sore as I could be, all things considered. My head aches, but it's only a mild discomfort compared to the pounding hangover I could have ended up with. Given the strength of those cocktails, I probably got off lightly.

I'm a little sore after the pounding Elias and Caelan gave me last night too. And how they'd... I squirm as the recollection hits me. They had taken me at the same time, and *God*, I'd never felt so full or filthy in my life.

I remember all of it, even if I was tipsy at the time. Just the right balance of drunk enough to get all horny and needy and make it fun but not drunk enough to be too out of it to know what we were doing or for any of the memories to be lost.

Even if I'm feeling the ache of it now, the evening was so, so worth it.

There's a glass of water on the bedside table alongside a small packet of painkillers. I snort. They learned from last time then.

But it is thoughtful of them. I didn't realize how thirsty I was until the water hits my lips, and I down half the glass in one go. I take a small dose of

the painkillers to ease the discomfort, even though I could probably get by without them.

Besides, I adore these mornings when I wake up *knowing* they fucked me hard the night before. It's a good pain. The kind of pain that reminds me I'm well and truly owned.

I curl up in bed a while longer, pulling the covers around me while I wait for the painkillers to kick in. I don't have to get up or go anywhere. I have the freedom to sleep in as much as I like. It feels positively decadent.

That said, I'd rather sleep in with Elias and Caelan in bed with me. I wonder where they have gone to, probably not far. And my question is soon answered by the aroma of cooking from downstairs.

Crawling to the edge of the bed, I glance around. I don't really want to go downstairs naked, if only because being naked around cooking things, potentially hot oil and the like, doesn't seem like the best idea, but I also feel too lazy to get dressed properly.

The clothes from last night are still scattered all over the floor. With a grin, I scoop up Elias' shirt and shrug that on, only buttoning it to halfway up my chest. It swamps me a little, and I have to push up the sleeves to free my hands. The hem hangs low enough to cover the top of my thighs. My panties are torn apart and unwearable, thanks to Caelan, but I find his boxer briefs instead and pull those on. He is slim enough and they're tight enough on him that they won't immediately fall off me, at least. I don't bother with anything more than that.

It turns out to be Caelan in the kitchen. He's poking at a frying pan, and a bowl of pancake mix is on the counter with batter dribbling over the edge from where he's poured it but hasn't bothered to clean the lip.

"Mornin', Shan. What would you like on your pancakes?" he starts before turning around to face me. He almost knocks the pan clean off the stove in his distraction. "Christ," Caelan says, the desire in his eyes immediate and obvious. "Goddamn tease, coming down here looking like that."

When I pad across the tile to join him, he grabs me by the waist and pulls me in to kiss me firmly.

“Mmm... couldn’t be bothered to get dressed properly.”

Caelan snorts. “ ’Course. Nothing to do with trying to give me an instant boner, I’m sure.”

I grin. “Did I give you an instant boner?”

“You’re lucky I don’t have a wooden spoon, or I’d spank you so hard with it right now.”

I laugh and kiss Caelan again but leave off for the time being. I knew coming downstairs in nothing but Elias’ shirt would probably get a reaction, and it’s an enormous boost to my ego to know they *want* me like that. But I also don’t want to push too hard on the teasing. Caelan probably wouldn’t hesitate to fuck me over the kitchen counter, which is an incredibly provocative idea in theory, and I’d be so down for some other time, but my stamina isn’t quite up to par with a demon’s. Although I feel fine now with the painkillers, it’s probably a bad idea to keep pushing so hard when I’m already wrecked from last night.

So I settle onto the stool behind the island counter, propping my chin in my hands as I watch Caelan finish cooking the pancakes. He slides a plate to me and tosses various topping options onto the counter. He drowns his own plate in syrup and attacks it with gusto.

“Hey, Caelan?” I ask as I start to eat.

He’s not bad at pancakes, it turns out. Some are a little burned at the edges, but they’re good. The batter is tasty enough.

“Mmph?” Caelan replies, mouth full, and I laugh.

Elias would have words to say about Caelan trying to talk while eating, I’m sure.

But that’s kind of what’s bothering me.

“Where’s Elias? Is he working or something?”

Caelan slows, finishing his mouthful and putting his plate down before

answering. He hesitates, then shrugs. “He’s just being a stupid drama queen.”

“What?”

“He’s hanging out in the abyss sulking or something.”

“Oh.” I glance down at the remains of my pancakes, appetite suddenly abating. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Wha... no! Hey, c’mon, doll, don’t look like that. Elias is a fuckin’ idiot, that’s all.”

“Everything seemed fine yesterday,” I say doubtfully.

Caelan huffs an irritated laugh. “Yeah, he makes it *seem* that way. Look, I’ve been hanging around that prick for years, and I have never in my life met anyone who is worse at dealing with addressing their feelings. Whatever shit has crawled up his ass, it’s been festering for a long time. It ain’t your fault.”

Direct or not, the sinking sensation in my stomach is very convincing. There must be some reason that ties back to me. All those little moments I remember when he seemed off. While we were shopping yesterday, the way he’d gotten so lost in thought staring at me after that date when he’d explained about his past.

“Do you know what he’s upset about?”

Caelan fidgets, then sighs. “I can take a guess why he’s sulking today in particular.”

“Why?”

“We were gonna ask you something last night, but then he went off rambling about goddamn souls and shit, and then you were drunk and horny, and you know how that played out.” At least that seems to spark his humor again, and he’s leering by the time he’s finished speaking.

I give him a small smile in return, even if it is still half-hearted behind my concern. “Yeah. We, uh. Got a bit distracted, huh?”

“Best way to spend an anniversary if you ask me.”

I hardly disagree. But... “What were you going to ask?”

Caelan rubs the back of his head. “Ah, screw it. He’s gonna be royally

pissed at me for telling you, but he's clearly not going to do it himself without being a total ass, so... we were gonna ask if you wanted to move in. Like, as a proper thing."

I stare at him for a long moment, chest tightening. "As in... here? With you?"

"Yeah. No pressure or anything, it's not a big deal. If you'd rather stay where you are 'cause it's closer to your work and college and shit, that makes total sense. You can just come visit when you're free or whatever."

"If I lived here..." I begin slowly.

"That's why we drove up," Caelan explains. "Give you an idea what the commute's like. We can't be around to jus' carry you places all the time, but the car's there for you to use if you want to. Not like we *need* it for anything really."

The house. The location. 'My' room. It all fits together a little too perfectly, for all of Elias' explanations of it being useful for them and something they wanted regardless. "How long have you been planning this?" I ask, voice quiet.

"A while."

"And Elias..."

"It was his idea, but the closer it's been getting to asking you, the more he's been getting all worked up about it, getting cold feet or something."

"That's why he's gone off somewhere?"

Caelan shrugs again. "You asked for my best guess. He's got too much of a stick up his damn ass to talk to anyone 'bout anything, so. Dunno for certain. Figures, though."

I stand up, pushing my plate away. "I want to talk to him. Take me to the abyss."

Caelan stares at me for a moment, then laughs. He doesn't mean it to be mocking, and it doesn't sound it, but given the way my stomach is churning, it's grating to have him be so dismissive.

“That’s a sweet gesture, Shan, but trying to talk to Elias when he’s in a *mood* is like trying to talk to a brick wall.”

“At least let me try.”

Caelan’s laughter fades as he realizes just how serious I am about it. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Look. Elias spends so long bottling shit up that if he does snap, it’s... not pretty. I don’t want you getting hurt if things turn nasty.”

I give Caelan a wry smile. “What, is it worse than you when you threaten to murder me because you think I’m cute?”

He huffs. “Fine, we both got our issues. But yeah. Much worse than that.”

“I don’t care. Take me to him.” I hold out my hand to Caelan, and he runs his eyes over me.

“Dressed like that?”

“Caelan.”

“I’m just saying.”

I roll my eyes. “Screw how I look. I just want to talk to him.”

“Maybe seeing you looking all sexy in his shirt will snap him out of it or something,” Caelan suggests unhelpfully. But he takes my hand and pulls me close against him. Then I shudder as the unsettling, hair-raising sensation of sliding between dimensions closes in around me.

It feels *worse*, somehow. The abyss has always been terrifying in its incomprehensible depth and unendingness, but it was a neutral nonexistence, like how a black hole does not care what it devours. But now there’s something malicious. Angry.

I shouldn’t be here.

“Told you Elias was sulking,” Caelan mutters, squeezing my hand tighter. “You don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do.”

But the more I walk beside Caelan through the black stain of existence, the more I start to doubt myself. It makes my stomach churn, every doubt and

anxiety irrationally flaring up a thousand-fold. *My fault. It's my fault Elias is mad. It must be.*

It feels like it could bring me to my knees, seep into every crack and tear my mind apart. There's a cold sweat beginning to bead on my forehead.

Caelan reaches up and grazes his knuckles against my cheek. "You're pale as hell. We should get outta here. Elias is right, it ain't any good for you."

I grit my teeth. "I'm not leaving without him!"

I pull away from Caelan, and that's the worst thing I could have done. I've barely taken one step away, and yet somehow, he's vanished entirely into the darkness. My heart jumps to my throat, barely holding back a terrified sob. My sense of direction is already completely thrown off. I turn desperately, stumble, and run—

Straight into Elias.

Elias is there, and I immediately fall, trembling, into his arms. The world shifts around us, and we're back home in the master bedroom.

"What are you doing," he says, voice dripping poison and near cracking with the effort of not shouting.

I sink to my knees. *Shit. He's mad.* Even though we're not in the abyss anymore, the room seems like it's darkening and closing in around me, wood shrieking beneath the weight of his power. His shadows are all around him, seeping from him like a living entity, a writhing, roiling mess, more violent than I've ever seen them before. They flare out like a thunderstorm, a black cloud almost as terrifying as the abyss itself.

"E-Elias ..." He could break me with a single look. Yet still, I stand and face him. "Caelan said you were upset. I wanted to see if you were all right."

"*Stupid,*" he accuses, harsh enough to make me wince.

"I love you, and I didn't want you to be alone," I desperately try to explain.

Elias' expression morphs, and for a moment I see fear beneath his barely

controlled rage. “Do you have any idea how badly you could have been hurt?” he roars. He turns on Caelan, who I didn’t even realize was there. He must have followed us back out to reality. Elias snarls. “How *dare* you take that sort of risk with her.”

“Chill the hell out,” Caelan spits back. “If you weren’t sulking in there in the first place, she wouldn’t’ve gone after you.”

“Please. If I did something wrong, *tell me.*”

Elias’ lips turn up into a sneer, eyebrows furrowing with the effort of trying to calm his temper, shove it all down again, and go back to pretending everything is fine. Caelan’s right, he’s going to snap soon. Anything I say risks making it worse.

“Caelan told me... about you wanting me to move in.” God, I’m risking making it so much worse. “Is that what...”

“I won’t let you go,” Elias says, and it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Slowly, he steps toward me, and instinct makes me back away until I end up hitting the wall. *Afraid. Oh, God. I’m afraid of him.*

“Yes,” he acknowledges bitterly. “We were going to offer, but do you think I ever had good intentions? I would keep you here. Slowly cut you off from everything. You’d finish your degree. Quit your job. And then you’d stay. I’d *make* you stay. No one else can ever have you!”

He slams his hands into the wall on either side of me, and I gasp. It’s the same intensity as when he gets possessive of me in bed, but worse. So much worse.

“If I had my way, I’d keep you all to myself forever.”

“I’m trying to be better for you.”

That was what he’d said before. And now it’s clear his jealousy and possessiveness run far, far deeper than he’d let on.

“Fuck’s sake, you’re scaring her!”

“Stay out of this, Caelan.”

Elias cups my face, and I tremble at his touch, heart pounding. His eyes are pure black. “This is what I am, dear. A monster. I will sink my claws in, and I won’t let go until you break. You need. To. Run.”

“No,” I insist.

Anguish flashes across his face. “Don’t you get it?” Elias snarls. “Anyone else, I wouldn’t care. I would claim them and use them until they had nothing left to give. That’s what I *do*. But you...” He pauses, and for a moment, he leans in and presses his forehead against mine. His voice comes out strained. “I don’t want that for you.”

Even though I’m shaking, I stare him down. “You’re being stupid,” I inform him. “Just because you’ve used people like that before doesn’t mean it can’t be different this time.”

“I will hurt you. I’m telling you to *leave*.”

The words cut like ice through my heart. *He thinks it’s for the best, that’s all it is. I understand that.* But it still hurts enough to bring me close to crying.

“If I stay...” I say, my voice trembling. “If I stay, you *might* hurt me. You *might* let your possessiveness slip. But if you throw me away like this...” I choke, trying to force back the tears welling up. “You don’t even know what you’ve done for me. How much better my life is with you. Even when we’re not together, you’ve given me so much more confidence in myself. You made me believe I was worth something. If I stay, maybe you’ll hurt me. But if you make me leave, you will *destroy* me.”

For a moment, I think maybe I got through to him. He stays silent for a long moment, the tension heavy enough that it feels like it could suffocate us all. He takes a step back. Then another.

His power is even more uncontrolled and tumultuous than originally, shadows splitting away completely and *screaming*. They writhe around him, sharp spikes of darkness erupting like solar flares. He’s visibly shaking with the effort of holding himself together, even more conflicted than before.

I reach my hand out after him. “Elias—”

“Stay. Back,” he warns.

“Please! We can work something out.”

“Not like this.”

I stumble forward. My head is spinning, vision blurred by tears. *We can. We have to be able to work it out. If it’s his possessiveness, his worry about hurting me, we can work through it. I don’t believe he just doesn’t want me. I can’t believe it. It’ll break me if I do.*

If he didn’t want me, he wouldn’t be so possessive of me in the first place. Right?

His voice is strained, almost desperate. “I need space.”

“Running and never talking about anything is what let things get this bad in the first place,” I plead. “Talk to me, please, Elias. You can’t just—”

“Stay *back!*” Elias snarls.

There’s a grip around my wrist, and Caelan takes hold of me, yanking me back. “Shannon, fucking *listen*. It ain’t safe—”

“I don’t *care*.”

“Even I wouldn’t go near him in that state! Don’t be a goddamn idiot!”

I shake Caelan off and resolutely approach Elias. He seems barely human, almost entirely swallowed up by the livid blackness surrounding him.

He steps back again, and I can tell. I can see it in the way his lips curl and his eyes harden. He’s going to retreat where I can’t follow. Back to the abyss. And there’s no way Caelan will take me back in there again after all of this.

There’s only a split second to think. I lunge forward, desperately trying to reach him. So close, close enough to step into the writhing mass of shadows that are roiling and bursting like a storm and it...

It hits like a punch to the gut, the impact of his power.

I choke. I can’t even gasp, all the wind forced out of me in an instant.

For one moment, Elias’ expression is pure, abject horror. Then the darkness swallows him completely, and he vanishes into nothing.

Into the abyss.

I sink to my knees.

I wish I could scream. I wish I could feel anything. But it's just numb. Cold. The shock leaves me paralyzed.

It hurts, I realize. Not just my heart. That too. But my chest, just below my ribcage, where I felt the impact of his shadows flaring out in another violent eruption.

One of them hit me.

Distantly, I raise my hand to touch it. The flesh feels tender, like a fresh, deep bruise. For a moment I think there's blood, but, no. Not blood. There's no actual wound. It's just a black, solid shadow, thick and sticky and staining my fingers like ichor.

Caelan's yelling for me. I can barely hear him over the ringing in my ears.

He kneels in front of me, gripping my face between his hands and forcing me to look at him.

"Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*," he's swearing. I've never seen him look so upset. "Shan, please talk to me."

" 'm okay," I say. My tongue feels too heavy in my mouth.

Caelan's hand drops to where Elias hit me. He undoes the buttons of my shirt, pulling it open to see better, and his fingers gingerly brush over the tender injury.

"See," I mumble. "Jus' a bruise."

Caelan's lips curl up into something feral. "I'm gonna *murder* him," he says, quiet but vicious, deadly serious.

"It's okay—"

"It's not fuckin' okay!" Caelan yells, the violent crackle of lightning echoing around him. "Dammit. You can't see like we do. That isn't just some insignificant physical injury!" He grits his teeth. He can see me wincing and lowers his voice. "He pierced right through your soul."

“Oh.”

I don't know what that means. I'm too numb to really care.

Caelan's hand clenches into a fist. “And he left. He just *left!* How the fuck can he—” Caelan cuts himself off, standing abruptly. He slams his fist against the wall, *into* the wall in sheer rage. He screams in frustration as he drags his claws through the plaster, tearing a huge gash.

“C-Caelan?”

For a moment he stands there, glitching and panting until the flare of anger burns itself out. Then with a disgusted grunt, Caelan slams the wall one last time and buries his face in his hands. “I can't fix this,” he says. “I don't know how to fix this.”

He sounds... afraid. Lashing out in fear.

He returns to my side and wraps his arms around me, pulling me against him. I sigh and lean into the contact. Caelan is warm. It feels nice to rest my cheek against him. I'm so cold and clammy.

His hand covers the wound again. “You can't see it,” he repeats, voice cracking and breaking. “It's like... watching you bleed out. Just. Energy instead of blood.”

“Bad?”

He laughs bitterly. “Yeah, it's fuckin' bad.”

For the first time, something like fear manages to pierce through my numb haze, settling like ice in my gut. I grab hold of Caelan, fingers clutching at him.

“I can't fix it,” he mutters. He doesn't protest about my clinginess, only holding me tighter himself. “Elias is the one who knows all the energy bullshit. I can't!”

“It's okay,” I try to reassure him, but my voice is shaking too.

“No. No, screw that. I'm not just giving up!” He trails off, fingers tightening into a fist. “Elias manipulates and drains energy. I don't mess with other people like that, but I got a bunch of electric shit. That's just like bursts

of super high energy, really.”

My mind is too cloudy, ears ringing, and I can hardly focus on what Caelan is saying.

“I can give you a jumpstart. Yeah? Or like how people cauterize wounds. They use electricity for that nowadays. Maybe it’s the same kinda theory, but on an energetic level.” Since he’s rambling, he cuts himself off and takes a breath. There isn’t any choice.

Caelan lays his hand over the vivid black bruise at my diaphragm, still sticky with black ichor. “I’m sorry, Shannon. This is probably gonna hurt like a bitch.”

For a moment, everything is still. Silent. Waiting with bated breath. I feel his power against the wound, and the first touch of it feels like nothing more than a faint static shock. Then he directs his energy into me properly, and I scream.

It’s like getting electrocuted. Worse, maybe. Caelan clings to me as my body jerks and convulses against him, his teeth gritting in concentration.

It hurts. The pain is unbearable, and he won’t *stop*, and I almost wish he’d just let me just die instead.

It’s burning out every nerve in my body. Flooding me with so much energy it feels like it’s going to break me, overloading my entire existence.

I can’t breathe. The agony is too unbearable.

Not just physical.

It feels like something inside me shatters *violently*, and it’s more than I can bear.

For a moment, I’m vaguely aware of Caelan calling my name, one of his hands cradling my head and the other clutching my hand over my chest. But there’s too much pain. Too much damage.

I weakly curl my fingers against his, then darkness claims me as I black out for good.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Everything about the world feels wrong.

It still feels sore, a deep, bone-seated ache. I can't tell if the pain is even physical or not. Opening my eyes makes it worse. It's too bright, too vibrant, and it makes my head swim.

I stir slowly, squinting my eyes open more gradually this time. I try to take stock of where I am. In bed. My bed, not the master bed, warm and tucked in under the covers. There's a vase almost overflowing with roses on the dresser, a little wilted and past their best. I'm still dressed in just Elias' oversized shirt and Caelan's boxers. They didn't change me while I was unconscious. Maybe they didn't want to risk moving me too much.

Caelan. And Elias. I consider calling for them, or getting up to find them, but that feels like it would cost far more energy than I have available.

It turns out to be unnecessary anyway.

Something clatters downstairs, and Caelan immediately appears in the room, nearly stumbling in his haste to join me at the side of the bed. I can feel him, the flickering, crackling hum of energy he radiates, like a displacement in the air as he shifts through the dimensional gap to get here.

"Thank *fuck* you're up," Caelan says, a note of relief buried beneath his constant crassness.

"Mmm..." I agree. *I'm not sure I'd call it 'up' just yet.* I try to push

myself to a sitting position, but Caelan grabs my shoulders and takes my weight for me instead.

“Hey, whoa, don’t push yourself. That must’ve been rough as hell. You okay?”

“I... think so.”

Everything still feels so off, distant and dissociated, like my very existence aches. But given everything that happened, that’s hardly much of a surprise. It’s better with Caelan here, at least.

Everything that happened. The injury. The argument that led to it.

My heart sinks.

“Elias...”

“I’m here, love,” Elias says softly. He’s appeared too, but he’s keeping his distance, lingering on the other side of the room. The guilt in his expression and radiating off him is palpable.

I sit up straighter and reach for him. He’s reluctant at first but gradually steps closer. He’s more solemn and subdued than I’ve ever seen, shadows barely visible around him.

He sits on the edge of the bed beside me.

“I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t,” I interrupt. I take his face in my hands, fingers trembling. “It was an accident.”

“I hurt you. I could have killed you.”

“You told me to stay back. Caelan told me. I didn’t listen to either of you. I was, I was the stupid one. I kept pushing, and if I’d just *listened* in the first place, it would never have happened.” Now my voice is trembling too. It feels like the weight of the guilt, Elias’ and my own, is going to crush me. “It was my fault.”

He brushes my hair from my face, and the tender gesture breaks me.

I cry. I don’t even know *why*. It’s just. Everything. The argument catching up to me. The hurt, the fear that they’d force me away, being so

helpless and unable to get through to him. An injury of that severity, coming closer than I probably even realized to death. It's a lot to process.

Elias pulls me into his lap, and I hide my face in his neck. I wrap my arms around him, my fingers digging into his back as I cling to him. He holds me just as tightly in return, embracing me like he intends to never let go.

The quiet tears won't stop, but even more noticeable is the way I'm trembling. Elias buries his face into my hair, cradling my head as he rests his own against the top of mine. The quiet anguish in his expression only breaks my heart even more.

I don't know how long we stay like that. It feels like an embarrassingly long time before I finally cry it all out. But eventually, I fall quiet, still shivering, but my breathing evens at last. Elias doesn't let go of me, and I'm glad about that.

He murmurs my name, gently stroking a hand through my hair.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, voice hoarse.

"You have nothing to apologize for."

It almost scares me even more. Now I'm done crying, I just feel empty. *Where do we go from here?*

"Elias... did you mean it? When you told me to leave?"

His grip on me tightens, and there's a pause before he replies. "No. It might have been better for you if you did, but I never wanted it."

I didn't realize just how much I needed to hear that. The relief threatens to push me right back into crying again.

Elias hesitates even longer, his guilt only growing worse instead of better. It's obvious from the look in his eyes how bitterly torn he is.

"Shannon," he begins, voice dangerously quiet. "About the injury."

"I'm okay. Caelan fixed it."

"No, dear. It's not that simple."

A chill of fear curls in my gut. After all, what do I even know about what Elias' powers can do? Caelan said that those things... those shadows of

Elias', the essence of the abyss-like power he commands, had pierced my soul. What the hell are the ramifications of that?

Now Caelan is looking guilty as well. "Sorry, doll. I did what I could, but..."

"But?"

He shrugs ineffectually, as if he could shake away the weight of what he's done.

"No," Elias says. "If I'd stayed and faced the consequences of my actions, maybe things could have turned out differently. Caelan did what he had to. You can't blame him."

They're making me so damn nervous now. "Blame him for *what*?"

The two of them share a glance. Then Elias lowers his hand, hovering it above where the wound was. "He used his own energy to seal the gap that had been torn in yours. It had to become part of you. And he also sealed in some of my energy, the remnant of my power that injured you in the first place and already corrupted and drained you. Under the circumstances, with the strength of the energy he was using..."

"I might have accidentally fused some fragment of our souls into yours," Caelan concludes.

Oh.

Oh, *fuck*.

I don't even know how to process that.

I can only stare at them. "Your s-souls?" I attempt shakily.

Mind racing, I try to work through everything they've told me about all of it. About the way their souls are warped, tangled with something human, entwined together on a quantum level. Permanent. Irrevocable.

And now mine was combined with theirs.

"I'm sorry," Elias says softly. "This isn't a fate we would have wished on anyone."

"Trust us, we know how goddamn shitty it is to go through."

My heart is pounding far too fast. I can hear the echo of my pulse in my ears. Elias takes both my hands in his, but I can barely feel the contact, staring straight through him.

“I-I don’t...” I swallow. “What does that *mean*?”

“We don’t know how it will affect you exactly. Fortunately, the fragments are small. You are still the same person. Mostly.”

“Mostly,” I echo hollowly.

“We’ll work through it together with you,” Caelan promises.

Elias strokes his thumb over my knuckles, glancing down. Something almost like self-loathing curls his lips up into a grimace for a moment. “Do you know what the worst thing is?” he asks bitterly. “I’m *happy*. I wanted to keep you, and now you’re bound to us on the deepest level imaginable.”

“It’s... it’s okay.” My head is still spinning, stomach churning as I try to understand the gravity of all of this. But it’s okay. “I think...” I pause for a breath, trying to work out exactly what I think. “I might be a bit pleased about that too.”

And maybe that’s fucked up. Part of my soul isn’t even mine anymore. There’s something demonic in me, something that’s theirs. And I’m happy. But it’s a strange and bitter happiness.

Elias is right. I wanted us to be together, and now, now we’re going to be together forever.

I glance away, not quite able to meet Elias’ eyes. “Like Caelan says, we’ll work through it, right? Everything will be okay.”

“I admire your optimism,” Elias says wryly. “But, yes, you’re right. Whatever may come of this, we will handle it. However, there are more pressing matters to your immediate health. Do you need something to eat, drink? You were unconscious for quite a while.”

I blink. I glance between them, then at the clock. It’s late in the morning, but I realize I have no idea what day.

“How long is ‘a while?’ ”

“Five days.”

It takes a second before that sinks in. “Shit! I’ve been missing classes and work—”

Elias cups my cheek and hushes me. He laughs somberly. “You seem more concerned about that than the potential loss of your humanity.”

“I mean, I...”

“It’s all right. Your manager called. The contact was marked as such on your phone. I hope you don’t mind that I answered. I informed them of the truth, for most of the part. That there had been a serious accident, and you were unavailable. I’m certain I could forge hospitalization documents if you wanted to present those. If they show no empathy and still try to hold you accountable for the time missed, I’ll allow Caelan to handle the matter from there.” He concludes the statement with a quiet, dangerous smile, and Caelan snorts.

“But for real, doll. Screw work. You need to eat and get your strength back up.”

I don’t feel that hungry. Maybe a little. But my stomach is still full of so many butterflies after everything that’s happened that food is the last thing on my mind.

If work knows, Grace probably knows. She’s going to be worried out of her mind. I don’t even have a personal phone number for her. As friendly as she is, and as much as we talk during breaks, I still don’t even know her outside of work, not really.

I can’t think about organizing my life or contacting people yet. My head is still spinning. I can barely focus on this. On them.

“We’ll give you some space,” Elias says. “It must be a lot to take in. Come downstairs when you’re ready. We’ll have a meal prepared for you.”

I nod at that. Some space to process sounds good, but even so, I’m not sure I want to leave things like this.

I stretch out my hand as Elias stands, then think better of it. There’s still

so much we need to talk about. Like what Elias was so upset about that it erupted into an argument.

Elias notices and pauses. He leans back in to kiss me. “Any more questions you have, we’ll answer later. Take care of yourself first.”

“All right.”

Caelan pulls me into a tight hug and kisses me as well. “You scared the shit out of me, not gonna lie,” he says. “I’m glad you’re okay. I mean. Sort of.”

I smile weakly and kiss him back. “Sort of,” I agree.

He leaves with Elias after that, and I’m alone in my room again.

I flop back down onto the bed. The silence feels deafening now, without them, and I pull the pillow over my head as if I could drown it out. Maybe I was putting on a brave face for them without even realizing it because now they’re gone, I don’t even know how I feel.

Some sick part of me is thrilled. I wanted to belong to them. And, oh, did I get my wish. It could be something fantastic to be like them, to be with them. Permanently.

But it could also be a curse. The way they were acting about it, so guilty and worried for me, sows the seeds of fear. I don’t know what this means. I don’t know what will happen. And my mind recalls what Caelan said about how badly being part human messed him up. The spiral of his pain, going so far to destroy himself.

I’m scared. Yet elated. But also exhausted and hurting, and is it any wonder I can’t think straight? That’s one hell of a bombshell they dropped on me.

Slowly, I come to a resolution. There’s nothing I can do to change it, and I’m only driving myself into a panic trying to think too hard about it all. Get up and get on with things, there’s no other option. There will be time to work everything out and process it at my pace later.

I head to the bathroom first. Splashing water on my face makes me feel a

little more alive, at least, wiping the dried remains of my tears from my cheeks.

And I have to know. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I gingerly reach out to touch it. My eyes are red and puffy and sore, and I look a mess, but not any different. Not on the surface. *Except...*

I unbutton Elias' shirt to see the site of the injury is very much still visible. There's none of the black ichor left, no blood or scar tissue to indicate it was ever any kind of wound. It looks just like a tattoo, like vivid black ink beneath my skin, in an uneven starburst that reminds me of a gunshot exit wound.

I brush my fingertips over it, tracing the outline. This time Elias' mark will be permanent.

Other than that, though, there's no sign of any change. Not physically, anyway. Ever since I woke up, I've felt off. Pretty obvious why now. But it's something so intangible I can't even explain it to myself.

My vision is the most notable thing. Even that is incredibly subtle, but it's enough of a shift to be unsettling. As though I've gone from watching the world on an old CRT television to seeing it in high definition, everything looks a little more vibrant, in sharper focus.

It hurts my head, like trying to adjust to new glasses that don't have quite the right prescription.

Running a bath, I sink into it, closing my eyes, trying to relax and let the water strip away some of my doubts and fears. It doesn't work. My hand keeps returning to the ink-like scar just below my ribcage.

After I wash, I dry off and get dressed before going downstairs, but picking an outfit is the last thing I want to do. I throw on my pajama shorts and a tank top. It's not like I'm going out anywhere.

Elias and Caelan are in the kitchen. They said they were going to be anyway, but I can tell. I can sense them. Kind of, if I turn my attention to them. Their presence feels familiar, the cold static of Elias' power or

Caelan's humming electricity. Just at a distance.

It's odd, but not bad.

I mean to ask them if it's something to do with having our souls entangled, but I'm immediately distracted by the sight of the living room.

"What the hell?" I ask, coming to a standstill at the bottom of the stairs.

The place is a mess. One of the sofas is overturned, and the other has a large gash carved almost the full way through it. There are slashes in the walls and the wooden bannisters, the houseplants are on their sides, spilling soil onto the wooden floor, and dark splattered stains that look uncomfortably like blood in places. The piano is the saddest sight of all. Half of it is crushed and caved in.

I can take a guess at what happened. They fought and fought seriously.

"My apologies, dear," Elias says, emerging from the kitchen and drying his hands on a tea towel. "I haven't got around to tidying up yet."

Caelan follows immediately behind him and snorts. "You just don't want to."

It seems unusual for Elias to allow such a wreck to persist if it's been five days. He must've had plenty of time to fix it up if he wanted to.

I see him tense, just minutely, and a pang of utter remorse flickers across his face again. "It still serves a purpose as a reminder," Elias says shortly, before returning to the kitchen to keep an eye on whatever food he is preparing.

I furrow my eyebrows, turning to Caelan for an explanation since he's usually more forthcoming.

Caelan makes a vague, dismissive gesture. "I wasn't kidding when I said I was gonna kill him."

That only concerns me more. "What the hell did you two do while I was unconscious?"

Caelan seems to realize I'm serious about the question, staring him down until I get a real answer, and he grimaces.

“Look, I was *pissed*. How could I not be? After he did that to you and just ran?” Caelan says acidly. “And I know he knows it. No amount of apologizing is gonna change the fact he was a pathetic *coward*.”

“Caelan—”

“Don’t tell me I’m wrong, doll. He would’ve let you die because he couldn’t face the consequences of his own actions!”

“Caelan!” I interrupt. He’s getting way too worked up about it all over again, and his rage is scary. It hits far too close to home. “It’s okay. What’s done is done. I know he regrets it. And I think you made your point clear. The living room sure knows it...” I pause, sighing as I look at the mess again. It had been a really nice room too. “What exactly did you do?”

Caelan shrugs. “Beat the shit out of him. He let me. Only pissed me off more.”

“Okay,” I say. It doesn’t feel okay, not really, but they’re demons. Elias is fine and Caelan clearly didn’t do any permanent damage. Maybe it’s best just to let the matter lie. That’s an argument they need to work out between themselves, and I’ve sure learned better than to get in the way of their anger now.

I retreat to the kitchen, which feels like safer ground. Elias probably heard every word Caelan and I said, but he makes no comment on it.

“Here,” Elias says, guiding me to the dining room and laying a plate on the table in front of me. There’s a chunk of meat in thick gravy, cooked enough to be almost falling apart, served with carrots and broccoli and roast potatoes. “Eat, if you feel able to. You still look pale, and it’ll do you some good.”

Even though it is still a little early for lunch and the meal is excessive, I eat as directed. At first just to please him, but the moment I get some food in me, I realize just how famished I am.

He brings water too, and I finish off two glasses by the time I’ve finished the meal.

That feels a lot better, honestly.

Elias watches me the whole time, and I glance up at him once I'm done. "Please stop looking at me like that," I request quietly.

"Like what?"

"So damn guiltily. It's making my heart ache."

"Darling. I deserve to feel all the guilt in the world."

"Yeah, well, I can feel it too," I say. "And it *hurts*."

He frowns. "What do you mean you can feel it too?"

I stop and realize I let on more than I meant to. I shake my head. "I... don't know."

I don't understand anything I'm feeling.

Looking down, I toy with my fork, biting my lip. "I can... sense you, I think? I don't know how strong it is, maybe it's only because you were close by, but when I was upstairs, I could sort of..." I try to work out how to describe it, "... feel your presence, even from afar."

"That's not unexpected. It's something that will be easy enough for you to learn to tune out."

"What about... emotions? Thoughts?"

It's obvious where I'm going with this line of inquiry. Elias covers my hand with his, squeezing gently. "If I am close, yes. Somewhat. Nothing so specific as thoughts, but general emotions, particularly if they are strong ones, you may be more sensitive to. But again, it can be blocked out."

I turn my hand so I can twine my fingers together with his. "I keep feeling emotions that aren't mine, and it scares me. I think it scares me. I can't even work out how I feel because there's all this *noise* in my head."

Numbness, guilt, anger, fear, loss, relief. A cold, possessive satisfaction. Closeness.

"I suppose it's the other way 'round for you, ain't it?" Caelan comments from the archway.

He brought me dessert as well, but now that this conversation is

happening, I can only pick at it.

“What do you mean?” I ask Caelan.

He leans against the table next to where I am sat. “We went from being fully-fledged demons to having some stupid part of us human. And, honestly, that was so damn long ago and so messed up that it’s not like I even remember it properly. You’re a human who’s got a touch of demon in you now. Wonder which is worse for your sanity?”

Elias gives him a hard look. “Caelan. That’s not helpful.”

Caelan seems to realize maybe his statement about sanity wasn’t the most prudent and reaches out to rub my shoulder. “Sorry, doll. It shouldn’t be so shitty for you. The fragmentation isn’t half as bad, and we’ll be here to help. Elias is good at manipulating energy. If it keeps flickering around like that for you, I’m sure he can probably help stabilize it.”

“Wait. Doing what?”

“Humans have very limited interactions in an energetic sense. Your minds and souls are restricted to your material plane. Some are more sensitive than others, people you consider psychics or who can see auras or such. Given your current situation, you’ve been given far greater energetic capacity and sensitivity. Not enough to see the flow of energy yourself, although perhaps that is something that will come to you, but I have noticed your energy is still fluctuating rather significantly within its new capacity.”

Caelan scoffs. “God. You’re so fuckin’ *textbook*.”

“I don’t mind,” I say. “It’s easier for me to understand and process that way.” Elias’ matter-of-fact way of explaining gives me some distance. It doesn’t feel so much like a terrible, unknowable fate looming over me when he can look at things so logically. “And no. I don’t think I can... *see* energy, however you mean it.”

“It may take your mind some time to adjust before that happens. Or it may never occur. Either is fine.”

Despite my distraction and how the seriousness of the conversation dulls

my appetite, I find I've finished my dessert. I place my spoon down and stare at the wall opposite, looking past Elias.

"I just... feel like a mess."

"You're still stabilizing," Elias replies softly, seeing the pain in my admission. "Your subconscious is trying to return to the familiar human energy it expects while your soul is flooded with far more than you're used to. It's a dysphoria on the deepest level of your being. But you will adapt. It won't be like this forever."

"Caelan said you could help. With stabilizing it?"

"Doing so will delay your progress, but yes. If you need it—"

"I need it."

That look of guilt flashes across Elias' face again, and I can feel the wave of self-loathing remorse that floods through him. *He did this to me.* It's intense enough to make me wince. Elias immediately realizes and dampens the emotion on my behalf.

He picks me up, holding me close to him. "Caelan," Elias says seriously. "We're having cuddles."

I snort in surprise, then giggle. That was not something I ever expected to hear from Elias, and, of course, he's doing it for my benefit, saying something so uncharacteristic to make me laugh, but I appreciate it regardless.

Caelan is reluctantly amused as well. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I'm in."

Elias takes me back upstairs to the master bedroom and lays me down on the covers. He takes his jacket and tie off and joins me, laying at my side and simply holding me in his arms. Caelan settles at my other side, his forehead resting against the back of my neck and his hand on my waist.

Elias' shadows brush against me. They still feel like static but less cold now, somehow. The sensation feels like home. And it's not just a simple touch alongside his. It embraces me entirely, and it feels like a weight lifting off me. Like I can finally breathe again, when I didn't even know I was

drowning.

I give a shuddering little sigh, melting against them. Finally able to relax.

Caelan presses soft kisses against my spine, those fingers on my waist rubbing in soothing circles, while Elias strokes his hand through my hair. We stay in silence like that for what seems an age. Normally, I'd feel bad demanding so much affection from them for so long, but this time they're more than happy to indulge me. I need it. And, frankly, I think maybe they do too.

"Elias," I eventually murmur.

"Is it any better for you like this?" he asks.

"Yeah. A lot." I let the silence linger a little longer before speaking again.

"So, does this mean... I'm part demon now or something?"

Elias frowns. "Darling, don't worry about—"

" 'Cause that's sort of badass."

Caelan snickers from behind me, the graze of his teeth in the next kiss to my throat. "Priorities, huh?"

I grin, then bury my face against Elias' chest sheepishly. Honestly, with them here like this, with Elias stabilizing me, I suppose I feel much more like myself, and it's so much easier to accept everything that's happened.

"Come on. Isn't it?"

Elias' lips quirk up into a wry smile. "This should not have happened. But... if you wish to make the most of a bad situation, yes. You may consider it that."

"I have a piece of each of your souls as part of mine now?"

"Only a very tiny fragment, but yes."

"Is it terrible that part of me loves that? You know how badly I wanted to be with you and belong to you. And now," I echo Elias' words from earlier, smiling. "We're bound on the deepest level imaginable."

Elias returns my smile, but his is far more sorrowful. "You are ours. Eternally and irrevocably."

“That’s what you wanted, right? For me to be yours, forever.”

“Yes. But not like this—”

I quiet him with a kiss. “Are you gonna get all scary possessive again?”

He tenses, then sighs. “I admit it is a flaw and not one that can be resolved overnight. But…” The admission is not one he wants to make, and he only acknowledges it begrudgingly. “Knowing your soul is intimately entangled with ours does satisfy that beast somewhat.”

“I’m glad.”

Caelan snorts. “God. You’re way too forgiving. Can’t you at least try to be pissed at him?”

“It was an accident. And I’ve never been good at holding grudges.”

“I would understand if you did,” Elias says.

“No. But thank you for apologizing.” I roll over onto my side, turning to face Caelan instead. “And thank you too, Caelan. You did save my life, after all,” I say, grasping his hand. Caelan looks uncomfortable at the sudden shift of attention and the sudden depth of my sincerity.

He shrugs. “Yeah, and also wrecked it.”

“Don’t be dumb. Of course, you didn’t.”

“Elias may have injured you, but it was my stupid glitchy energy bullshit that got you stuck with a fucked-up soul like us,” he points out.

“You *saved my life*.” Caelan opens his mouth to protest again, and I roll my eyes. “Both of you are idiots.”

He huffs instead. “Well, thanks, Shan.”

“You are.”

Elias chuckles quietly, accepting that, in this instance, at least, he’s not undeserving of the title. “You may be right.”

“But… I’m an idiot too. I’m the one who fell in love with two demons, even though I knew it was a risk. I knew there would be consequences and that you would end up hurting me someday. But I also knew it was worth it.”

Caelan wrinkles his nose. “Aw, c’mon, don’t get sappy on us.”

I look him in the eye, grin, and kiss him. My expression sobers as I draw away from his lips. “I love you. And I mean that with every fiber of my being.”

For a moment, Caelan remains withdrawn, hiding behind the pretense of distaste at such sentimentality. But pretense is all it is, and it’s wavering. He takes my face between his hands and kisses me firmly in return, with far more passion than I was expecting.

I moan as he kisses me breathless for a very long time.

Even when he finally breaks off the kiss, he keeps holding me tightly. The electric yellow-green of his eyes glows intensely. “I... I wouldn’t have been okay if we’d lost you.”

I never expected him to say the same words back, not Caelan. But what he does say is as good as any admission.

I wrap my arms around him, holding tight.

“Everything’s going to work out,” I say, and for the first time, I believe it without hesitation.

“Yeah,” Caelan agrees.

Eventually, I loosen my grip on him, then draw away entirely with a small sigh. I turn to Elias, smiling. “I love you too, by the way.”

“Even having seen how much of a monster I can be?”

“Again. Demons. I knew that from the start,” I inform him wryly. Then I lean in and rest my forehead against his. “I still love you,” I murmur. “My Darkest Night.”

He smiles. “And I you,” Elias replies softly, his thumb caressing over my cheekbone as he cups my face. “Light of my Dawn.”

I stare at him in surprise, my heart skipping a beat. It takes a moment for what he just called me to sink in. He gave me a pet name to match the one I came up with for him, and it’s—

Light of my Dawn.

Elation blossoms, fluttering in my chest.

“You’ve never called *me* the Light of your Dawn,” Caelan comments facetiously, and I giggle. The interjection is a welcome distraction from my heart being about to burst.

Elias presses a kiss to my forehead, then lifts me by the waist. “Pardon me a moment, darling,” he mutters, rolling me over and placing me back down on his other side. I yelp, bewildered, but Elias’ intentions become immediately obvious as he straddles Caelan and kisses him thoroughly as well.

The kiss is intense, every bit as passionate as the one I shared with Caelan. Passion, heat, and something primal, yet somehow still caring despite all that.

“Okay. Wow.” Caelan lets out a breathe when Elias finally lets him up for air, flustered.

“I need to thank you too,” Elias says, with a quiet genuineness I don’t think I’ve ever heard him direct at Caelan. “For saving her, yes. But also, for staying through all my mistakes.”

Caelan’s never heard it before either, and he looks utterly lost for words for once. Eventually, face red, he splutters, shoving Elias off him.

“You’re getting soft,” he grumbles. But the complaint is blatantly nothing more than an attempt to save face, and all of us know it.

I curl my arm beneath my head and laugh at the two of them. They’ve come far as well. When we first met, they didn’t even really consider themselves ‘together’ so much as just fuck buddies. I suppose they said that. That they work better together with another partner to even out their more antagonistic sides. To be their counterbalance.

I’m so happy to be that for them.

For all Caelan’s grouching, he doesn’t complain too much when Elias keeps kissing him. He seems to be very interested in kissing back and undoing Elias’ shirt.

“Um...”

Caelan grins wickedly at me. “Want to watch us fuck?”

“I, uh. That’s... I mean, you don’t—”

He laughs at how flustered I am.

“Caelan,” Elias admonishes. Yet he doesn’t stop kissing along the column of Caelan’s neck. Caelan’s head tilts back, his eyes half-shut. He wraps his legs around Elias’ hips, grinding against him.

I squirm. I kind of want in, I’ll admit, if this is how things are going now. But just being able to watch them and appreciate it is kind of hot. And this feels like it should be their moment. This is probably the closest either of them has come to being genuine about their feelings.

Soft contentment of the recent conversation aside, I’m still kind of shaken. I crave affection, but honestly, maybe sex is a little much while I’m still coming to terms with the corruption of my soul and all.

So. Just watching is perfect.

Watching Elias and Caelan’s hands grasping at each other, pulling away their clothes, gripping at hair, Caelan yanking Elias’ head back to bite at his throat. The low groans as Elias takes hold of Caelan’s cock and strokes them together, quickly growing rough and needy.

Watching the way they move together as Elias fucks Caelan, the snap of his hips, the arch of Caelan’s back. The push and pull of it, how Caelan flips their positions, pins Elias down and rides him hard, then Elias takes back control by thrusting up into Caelan and disrupting his rhythm in a way that makes Caelan’s eyes roll back.

Caelan’s kisses are harsh and biting, and his nails visibly claw red gashes into Elias’ pale skin. Yet Elias doesn’t return the violence. He just keeps fucking Caelan steadily, firm, and insistent but not harsh, until Caelan wears himself out.

“I’m still pissed at you,” Caelan mutters, even as he moans lowly.

“You have every right to be.”

“Don’t think I’m gonna forgive you just ’cause you’re sorry and you fuck

me good.”

“Understandable.”

Caelan snarls in irritation. “Stop making me want to stop being mad!”

Elias smiles, then drags Caelan back in to kiss him again.

They’re a beautiful disaster together, and I suspect they always have been. They don’t talk, too prideful to show vulnerability, needling at each other just to save face. But at the same time, they need each other just as much as I need them. Maybe even more so. The way their bodies move together, hands familiar with just how to stroke and grope, their kisses biting but at the same time, not lacking in care. There’s an intimacy in their violence.

Elias takes Caelan’s flushed, needy erection in his hand and strokes him roughly enough to make Caelan arch and hiss. He *likes* it rough. Elias keeps pumping Caelan’s cock until Caelan comes as well, and they rock against each other with panting breaths and low groans until they’re both spent.

Caelan flops back down onto the bed with a used, satisfied moan. Elias takes a moment to clean them both up, but it’s perfunctory. He soon returns and draws me into the post-coital embrace alongside Caelan and himself.

“Apologies,” Elias says, breathless. “That... escalated.”

I laugh. “I enjoyed the show.”

“Hah. ’Course ya did,” Caelan comments, muffled by the pillow he’s half-buried his face into.

I kiss them both. Despite the thoroughly explicit display they just put on for me, I’m not turned on to the point of being too needy or uncomfortable, even though it was undeniably hot. My body sure wants to be turned on. But my head’s a mess, not really in the mood for sex, and the conflict between the two has me in a strange in-between state.

I might need to masturbate the next time I get some alone time.

But as we fall into silence, quietly dozing in the comfortable aftermath, worries for the future begin to plague my mind instead. *What do I do next?*

Where am I even going to go from here?

I've got my master's degree, with a whole week of classes to catch up on now, apparently, and work, if the lab will even take me back after vanishing like that. I need to notify them and let them know I'm okay. Or, as okay as I can be.

If it was the middle of the day on Sunday when the *incident* happened, and Elias says I was out five days, that should make today Friday again. Right? It's so disorientating to realize I'm not even sure what day it is.

That gives me another weekend, at least. I'm glad for that. If there is one thing I am certain of, it's that I'm not ready to leave Elias and Caelan's sides just yet.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

We have to get up eventually. Elias and Caelan have spent the whole rest of the morning indulging me, but the afternoon is getting on, and they have business to get back to. I can't stay languishing in bed all day either, despite my situation. I desperately need to get some work done too.

Elias and Caelan handle the practicalities, taking a quick trip through the abyss to collect some essentials for me—my laptop, textbooks, notes for my classes, and some more clothes.

Elias retreats to his study and invites me to join him, bringing an extra chair in from the dining room so I can sit on the opposite side of the desk and we can work in comfortable silence together. As much as I want to put in the effort to catch up on my classes, it soon becomes evident that's not going to happen.

I can't focus at all.

This new state of being, this soul, this amalgamation, whatever I am, is overwhelming now that Elias isn't actively stabilizing me. The world is so *much*. All my senses feel like they're in hyperdrive. Colors are too vibrant, almost swimming before my eyes. Sounds are deeper, richer. I swear that if I stop and pay attention, I can feel each molecule of air that dances across my skin. Every moment is a tumultuous cacophony of existence, beautiful and utterly terrifying in its enormity.

I can feel Elias and Caelan even more intensely, especially when they are as close as Elias is, sitting across from me. Caelan is fainter, a room over, but I can sense the energy of his being too.

Swallowing hard, I try to block the awareness of them from my mind because I don't just sense their presence. Their emotions pry at the edges of my consciousness, slipping in like intrusive thoughts, feelings and sensations that don't belong to me. That would be enough to fuck with my head by itself. But given the nature of what Caelan and Elias are, their energy isn't entirely pleasant.

Even though Caelan has mostly forgiven Elias after their moment together, he's still wound up, some part of him still mad. At Elias, or at other things, I can't be sure. It comes in bursts, but he feels it deeply, quick to anger, and his rage throws me completely off-kilter in an instant. It's explosive in a way that leaves me shaking and exhausted.

Elias is colder and more subdued. There is anger, too, at himself, and the sheer weight of guilt. It's more than that, though. For the first time, I feel the quiet, seething rage he's felt all this time, the injustice he still carries from thousands of years ago. It lingers like an oil slick, thick and black, drags me down, and leaves me choking in toxic sludge. And the pressure. I understand why he snapped. It feels unbearable, the amount of stress roiling and churning inside him. He is something bitter and alien and vengeful, forced to wear a suit and human face. And yet, despite it all, he's still moving forward and capable of being genuine and kind.

Perhaps I should be afraid. I finally comprehend their inhumanity and darkness, now more than ever.

Perhaps I should be more afraid of my own.

I stare at my hands instead of my notes. Initially, I do so to shift my thoughts away from Elias and Caelan, but then I lose myself anew just by gently twitching my fingers. How intensely bizarre it is. The human body. Flesh and bone controlled by tiny pulses of electricity in an overwhelmingly

complex orchestra. The blood rushes through my veins. I can hear it, see it, feel it. It is *maddening*, and it makes me want to tear all the blood vessels out of my own body just so it will *stop*.

“Shannon.”

Elias grasps my wrists tightly, and I startle. I had been so lost in my head I hadn't even noticed him moving.

“I'm okay,” I gasp out. I am. The spell is broken, and I feel like I've woken from an indistinct dream. I make a mental note to avoid fixating too hard on particular sensations, though.

I wonder if Caelan experiences the same thing.

Shaking my head, I try to give Elias a reassuring smile. “I just need to go and clear my head a bit,” I say, getting up to stretch my legs with a walk through the house.

I'm not sure moving is any better. I walk too quickly, the movement jarring. I'm trying to move too fast, almost jittering out of my skin with the amount of pent-up energy roiling in me, and my body can't keep up.

Maybe I should go for a run.

I've never gone running in my life, and while the thought feels good, I don't imagine straying too far from Elias and Caelan would be wise right now. Something in the back of my mind recognizes this isn't quite right, that I'm bordering on some kind of delirium. Irrational, impulsive. I don't know how to handle this energy at all.

But I know another way to get some of it out. A smile spreads across my face, wide enough that my cheeks hurt. The way the two demons spar sometimes... *Is this why?* Do they feel the same way, like they'll claw off their own flesh if they don't fight or fuck or bounce off the walls?

Caelan will play with me.

He's in his game room. It looks like he tried to play a video game, the television idling and a controller tossed aside on the floor. He got tired of it, though, instead taking up his guitar. Not truly playing it, but every so often,

striking a thunderous chord that matches his expression.

I purr. “Caelan.”

Caelan immediately puts the guitar aside and looks up, his face softening. Only for a brief moment, then an eyebrow raises, and concern flickers across his face. “You all right?” he asks genuinely.

I want to fight him. I want to spar. I want to do anything to stop feeling like I’m burning up.

I don’t know how to explain it to Caelan. At least not in words.

He can see energy, right? And he can probably sense my emotions the same way I can sense his. He’ll get it.

Barely even registering what I’m doing, I lunge at him. Not with any intention to hurt or to fight seriously. I just want to mess around, like we did that night on the weekend of the gala.

For once in his life, Caelan is taken completely off guard. I knock him off the beanbag he’d been sitting on, and he grunts as he hits the floor. I end up straddling him and pin his wrists down like they so often do to me.

“What the fuck, Shan?”

Caelan’s bewilderment makes me laugh. He catches on quickly, tossing me back onto the beanbag.

Now it’s getting good. I no longer have the element of surprise, but I roll to my feet and dive forward again. If I can knock Caelan’s legs out from under him before he’s up fully, I still have a chance.

“Oh no, you don’t,” Caelan growls out, stepping out of the way and twisting my arm behind my back.

I gasp. It strains the joints, but not enough to be painful. I push back into his hold instead of trying to get away, slamming my weight violently back into him. It’s enough to knock him slightly off balance and for his grip to loosen enough for me to dart away.

I understand why they like sparring. It feels incredible.

Caelan picks me up, and I make a noise of indignation.

“Okay. What’s this about?” he asks. “Not that I mind a bit of play-fighting, but you ain’t in the state to—”

I twist out of his grip, cutting him off before he can finish. Caelan reaches out for me again, but I lurch forward, shouldering his arm out of the way. A foot behind his leg, a hand beneath his chin, and my weight pushing through his center of gravity. I don’t get him to the floor again, but he stumbles, and we both go down together.

I giggle in delight as he rolls over on top of me.

“Shannon!”

Caelan’s sharp bark finally grabs my attention. His brows are knitted tightly together, a little with exasperation but mostly worry.

What is he worried for? I’m amazing.

“Come on. We’re going to Elias,” he commands, standing up again and crossing his arms. Despite himself, there’s an amused look in his eyes. He would have been enjoying himself if he weren’t so worried.

“Why? I’m fine.”

“Doll. The energy is burning you up like a fever.”

Oh. Maybe that makes sense. *A fever...* It does feel that way. *Should I be worried?*

Caelan lifts me, and this time I don’t fight him, though the urge definitely still remains. I let him carry me to Elias, who’s already at the door of his study as we arrive, nearly colliding.

“Give her here,” Elias says immediately, and Caelan hands me over without question. Elias sits me on the edge of his desk. “Shannon.”

I blink slowly. “What’s wrong?”

He gently places his hand below my sternum, over the inky black wound. Even though his touch is soft, I jerk as a sensation like ice cuts through my overheated haze. “You’re not used to handling this much energy. It’s festering. And your soul is still healing. I need to take some of it from you before the stress causes any further fractures.”

It's finally starting to sink in. "Oh."

Waves of guilt wrack through him, and I shudder as their weight echoes in my mind. He must notice because his energy and all sense of his presence cuts off abruptly. He's shielding himself.

Elias frowns. "We will have to do something about that..." He's talking more to himself. With a shake of his head, he reaches out and cups the back of my head. "I'm going to siphon off some of your life energy. Is that all right?"

Caelan lets out a snort from where he's loitering by the doorway. "First time I've ever heard you bother asking anyone," he comments, though not so acidly as he might have under other circumstances.

I nod, and Elias flashes me a smile, then leans in, kissing me.

I'm familiar enough with his kisses that I can immediately tell there is something different about this one. Not just that I can feel it all the more intensely because of the state I am in, but something else. Something that tastes like his shadows and static, something more than just a physical connection. The very essence of his soul is reaching out, ghosting against mine, with a soft, cloying pressure like his lips working with my mouth.

The sensation is heady and intimate in a way that defies human description. I shiver against him as he draws me in, entwining our energy together, then takes mine.

The phrase 'killing me softly' has never made more sense. He's draining something from me, something vital, but it feels so incredible I want to give everything I am to him. His grip on me tightens as I start to go slack. Weakening, lethargic and heavy, the flame of my life flickers and dims. But it had been burning so unbearably brightly to begin with that this is a relief.

I wonder if this is what it feels like to be fed on by a vampire?

Technically, I ponder dizzily, it can't be far off. After all, don't vampires drain life energy just the same? Elias takes it directly instead of requiring blood as a vector, that's all.

His low chuckle vibrates against my lips. Then he finally pulls away.

“Better?” Elias asks.

I stare at him dumbly, eyes glazed. “Fuck,” is all I manage to mumble.

Caelan huffs a short laugh, folding his arms and shaking his head. “You are so goddamn extra sometimes.”

“That was hot,” I say, finally finding my voice.

Elias is looking far too smug about it, although he smooths the expression over with care. “Be that as it may, how are you feeling now?” he prompts again.

Oh. Right.

Although I had felt weakened in the moment, the sensation doesn’t linger. I’m still a little more alert and sensitive than when we had been cuddling, but not in the excessive, near manic way it had escalated to over the afternoon. The heat, the desire to tear out of my own skin, and the overwhelming sensations, all of that has faded.

I breathe out heavily, then nod. “Much better. I just feel... normal.” As much as any of this can be normal.

Now that all immediate cause for concern is dealt with, Caelan cackles. “I can’t believe you tried to fight me.”

Years of ingrained habit would have me duck my head sheepishly and apologize but *you know what? I’m not sorry.*

“And I’ll do it again,” I say instead.

Caelan’s grin grows wolfish. “Oh, you are *on.*”

“Perhaps,” Elias interrupts mildly. “That is better left until Shannon is fully recovered.”

“Spoilsport.” There isn’t much heat in Caelan’s protest, though. He recognizes Elias is right about that one.

It does make me think, now that I have more capacity to do so. About my recovery, as they term it. The high of that much energy had been exhilarating but also terrifying and overwhelming. The headspace I had been in was scary

to look back on. There's no way I can go back to work or college in such a state. At best, it would be impossible to focus or function. At worst, I could end up doing something far more reckless and impulsive than just trying to spar with Caelan.

"Is that likely to happen again?"

"Quite probably," Elias replies, his tone somber. "I am sorry. I know it must be difficult to deal with."

I shake my head, struggling to find the right words to express myself. "I kind of liked it," I admit. "I felt... free. Confident. Like I could rule the world. Not like I was a different person, but that I could be completely myself without being held back by fear."

Elias smiles softly. "And it is good to see your soul shine so brightly."

"I don't want to lose that feeling."

"You will not. That level of energy will be normal for you now."

I'm pleased to hear it and also very much not. "Will it always be like... that?"

"No," Elias reassures. "It will merely take some time to adapt, mentally and emotionally. Your soul also needs more time to stabilize. At the moment, it is akin to a freshly healed wound. Too much energy runs the risk of reopening, but that will not always be the case."

"Okay." I can live with this. Or at least learn to work with it. "How long will it take?"

A slight frown creases Elias' brow. "It depends on a number of factors. How severe the difference between the entangled souls' energy is, how much of the energy was fragmented, and how willingly you accept the change. Caelan took years because of how hard he fought it." He catches my look of dismay and quickly amends, "His was an extreme case."

"Will I be able to go back on Monday?"

Elias and Caelan share a glance.

"Yeah, no. That's probably not a good idea," Caelan says.

I had figured as much. Part of me is relieved to hear it, to have the excuse not to deal with my normal life just yet. That's one thing too much on top of everything else that has happened.

Elias taps his fingers on the edge of the desk, weighing his thoughts carefully. "I believe I can make something for you that will suppress the excess energy if I cannot do so in person. It will take some time, though. It will be much more energetically complicated than merely making something inert like your collar."

Caelan grins. "In the meantime, I guess you're stuck with us."

"Oh no. The fates are cruel." Caelan narrows his eyes at my sarcasm, and I laugh.

The rest of the weekend is easier. At least one of them is close by, making sure I don't end up in as bad a state again.

That doesn't stop it from being overwhelming. I feel it creeping up on me multiple times, and I refuse to rely on Elias to always balance me out. One way or another, I need to adapt. I need to learn to handle it myself until it's second nature.

Trying to spar with Caelan was not exactly a successful outlet for my excess energy and mania last time. That much is obvious. I need something that will actually ground me, bring me back down.

The answer comes from the unexpectedly mundane. I find myself singing, as has often been my habit, whether to write my own songs or simply to vent.

I feel the suffocating rise of energy building up, and it's frustrating as all hell. I liked it at first, the sense of power, but the irrationality and oversensitivity that comes with it are worse. And the rollercoaster of it, fluctuating high then crashing back down, is exhausting. I'm definitely over it until it's stabilized at least.

So I sing one of Goëtica's songs to take my mind off it, a dark and aggressive one and find it curiously easier to focus. It's easier to modulate

my own energy by pouring some of it into the performance without exacerbating it.

It's so simple it catches me off guard. Not perfect, but a start.

I spend my time sitting in the living room, which Elias has since tidied up, and practicing. Not so much the singing itself but playing with the way it affects my energy, gradually feeling how I can make it swell and quiet.

Elias tilts his head as he listens to me, a small smile playing at his lips. "Have you ever considered contributing vocals for *Goëtica*?"

That does get me to stop, in surprise, more than anything. I can't tell if he is simply asking the question out of curiosity or genuinely thinking of offering me the opportunity.

"I..." I start, then hesitate. *Have I thought about it?* Wanting to sing has always been on my mind, though never a serious consideration. As much as I might enjoy it, stage fright would have never allowed such a thing.

That was before.

Before I had Elias and Caelan.

Before I had a fragment of their souls entangled with mine.

Before I had this *energy* burning through my veins, a blessing instead of a curse if I managed it well.

Now? I think I actually could.

"I might be up for that."

Elias nods, an expression of serious consideration on his face. "However, I did not intend to discuss that right now."

Elias approaches and settles on the sofa, beckoning me to join him. When I do, he conjures something in his hands, a deep black circle of twisting bands of shadows, each seeming to be made up of hundreds of strands as fine as a hair. They almost remind me of the diagram Elias created when he was trying to explain the functionality of souls at the restaurant.

"It is almost complete," he says. "I will shrink it down to the form of a ring after the final touches. When you wear it, it will keep your energy stable,

and shield you from experiencing any emotional feedback from Caelan and me.”

My relief is palpable, more at the idea of being able to reliably stabilize my energy than shying away from being able to sense the two of them.

“This is only a crutch,” Elias reminds me gently. “Use it when you need it to allow you to continue your life as normal, but do not become overly reliant on it. I would not see your soul wither.”

“I understand.” Although the truth is, I am not sure I entirely do, and his wording sends a small shiver of apprehension through me. “What about my soul withering?”

“Imagine it like a cast on a broken leg. Once finally removed, the muscle below is wasted away.”

Staring at the strange black mass Elias is holding, I wonder if this is a good idea after all. “That doesn’t sound ideal.” I was just starting to feel like I was coming into my own, getting used to all of this. I don’t want to wither.

“I would not offer you this course if it would harm you. That would only occur if you were to wear the ring permanently.”

Accepting that explanation, I nod. “It’s almost complete?”

Elias smiles. “One last touch. Your energy.”

“Oh.” I inhale sharply. “I don’t know how to...” Trailing off, I gesture vaguely instead, hoping to convey the general meaning. I don’t know how to manipulate energy or create things from thin air as he does or anything of the sort.

“I will guide you.”

One of Elias’ hands remains holding the indistinct, shadowy band while his other takes mine. He pulls my fingers through the middle of the black mass, holding them while his thumb strokes my knuckles.

“Try to imagine your energy gathering in your palm. A small orb, that is all that is needed.”

Feeling foolish and uncertain whether I could possibly achieve anything, I

follow his direction. Nothing seems to happen, but Elias just watches me with a fond smile and all the patience in the world, and it makes my face redden. It's such a contrast to the anguish hidden below his surface, yet he makes the effort for me.

He snaps his fingers and the shadows writhe, coalescing from their entwining, smoky black ropes into a solid ring. It falls into the palm of my hand.

It is a plain band as dark as Elias' magic, except for one small, silvery crystal set in it. He takes it from me and slides it onto my finger, kissing my forehead.

"Thank you," I say softly. The words don't do it justice.

Monday comes and goes, and I don't leave, even though I could and should. I have Elias' ring to tide me over if necessary now. Yet I can't face going back to my old life. The improvement has been steady, but even so, two days isn't enough to recover.

For better or worse, I'm bound permanently to them now, and nothing will ever be quite the same.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The ring Elias made helps a lot. That, and just time. The manic moments get fewer and further between, and the overwhelming panic and lack of control gradually fade as the week passes. I feel stronger. The vibrancy of the world feels more natural. Being around Elias and Caelan doesn't haunt me with phantoms of their intense emotions, which I'm extremely grateful for. I *missed* this—the ease and joy of just being with them.

I curl up against Caelan on the sofa. The television is playing something in the background, but I'm not really paying attention to it. I'm just enjoying being with Caelan. It feels like home.

Everything about him. His crude sense of humor, laughing at all the worst jokes in the show he's watching, and the way his voice glitches ever so slightly when he cackles. The fact that, despite trying to act tough and like he doesn't care about affection, he easily slips an arm around my waist without thinking. The electric yellow of his eyes, unnatural and demonic, yet fondly amused when he glances over to find me staring.

I press a gentle kiss against his neck. "You're gorgeous," I say, and he grins.

"You're so damn cute."

Caelan leaves it at that. They've both been incredibly good about acknowledging I've been through some shit and haven't pushed or even

mentioned sex at all.

But I do feel much more stable, just like they said I would. Not perfect, but stable enough. And they've been patient and understanding and done everything they can to help me. Far more so than I'd ever expected from a pair of demons, even a pair of demons I'm in a relationship with.

I love them. And I'm pretty sure they maybe love me too.

They won't say it in as many words. I don't expect them to, and I don't need them to either. But it's in the way Caelan was so broken up and afraid at the idea of losing me. Elias calling me the light of his dawn, with utmost weight and sincerity behind the name.

I love them.

I want them so badly.

Shifting in place so I'm facing Caelan more than the television, I kiss his neck again. Starting at the side, soft but insistent, trailing my lips over the scar across the front of his throat.

Caelan's breath catches. "Shan," he warns.

I kiss all the way across the line of scar tissue. Knowing where it came from and what it means, I want to show Caelan with utter reverence that I accept all his past and struggles.

It's not that scar alone. I slide my fingers beneath Caelan's top and pull it over his head, leaving him shirtless and amused at how forward I'm being. But he makes no protest. He only grins, eyes heavy-lidded and head tilting back almost unconsciously as I press hot, open-mouthed kisses down his throat, across his collarbones, and to his chest.

More scars. A few of them form a crisscrossing mess that almost makes me wonder if he tried to literally carve out his heart at some point.

Caelan doesn't seem to mind. He only hisses and arches minutely as I lick along the length of one of them, down to his nipple, and tug it gently between my teeth.

"Doll, what are you trying to do to me?" Caelan mutters, swallowing

back a small groan of pleasure.

I don't know myself, honestly. My heart just feels like it's overflowing with affection, and I need to express it in whatever way I can. And if that way is in gradually kissing and licking down Caelan's abs, I'm sure there won't be any complaints.

As I graze my teeth along Caelan's deep V-line down to the waistband of his jeans, I giggle, and Caelan twitches. The kisses I'm pressing against him are rapidly morphing into something far from innocent, and I lavish my attention on him.

Despite the way this is escalating, how *I'm* escalating it, I slow for a moment to press a more somber kiss against the scar of what must have once been a massive gash in Caelan's side. He says nothing, only lifts a hand to tangle into my hair and sighs, until I move lower and press one of those far-from-innocent kisses over the bulge beginning to show in his jeans.

"Dammit." He growls. "Little tease. You can't keep playing around like that and expect me to hold back."

I pull away, grinning and breathless. I undo my blouse and slide it off my shoulders, then with Caelan's eyes firmly glued to me, I reach around to unclasp my bra and drop that as well.

"I don't *want* you to hold back."

"Shit," Caelan says eloquently, and I laugh. The desire in his eyes as he drinks in the sight of me, topless for him, makes me shiver beneath the weight of it.

For a moment, his eyes linger on my abdomen. On the new inky stain on the skin there, marking how close I came to being gone. But then his hands slide up my sides, cupping my breasts, and this time it's my turn to moan.

My eyelids flutter, and I hum in pleasure. But I'm not finished.

I shoo his hands away, then lean back in to resume my initial task. I straddle his lap, back to teasing his neck now with kissing and nips, not hard enough to leave marks, but hard enough he can certainly feel it. My hand

between us rubs over the crotch of his jeans, then I bite down on his throat, and his cock twitches.

As much as a sadist as he may be, Caelan has a masochistic streak of his own as well.

“Shannon,” he hisses out my name.

It’s just making out, some heavy petting, maybe, but it’s clear he’s into it. Maybe he’s a little worked up since they’ve kept their distance, waiting for me to be ready. It doesn’t matter why. I just want to make him feel good.

If I’m honest, some part of me is curious. How *does* it feel for him?

“Wait a sec,” I murmur. I lean back just a little, enough to give myself some breathing room, and I take off Elias’ ring. Without it, I can just... let myself feel. After all, it’s easier to let their energy in than to block it. I firmly palm Caelan’s cock through his jeans, and the wave of his arousal hits me. My eyes widen.

“Oh, damn.” I groan, heat curling in my core.

That’s... oh, God, that’s—

Intense.

I’m acutely aware of my own steadily building arousal but being able to sense Caelan’s on top of that is enough to make me squirm and pant. I can feel the heat rising to my face, my cheeks rapidly flushing. Fumbling a little, I place the ring aside on the end table next to the sofa.

It’s distracting, but I don’t intend to leave my task unfinished.

I undo Caelan’s jeans and free his erection. Then I kiss him once more on the lips before sliding down his body to kiss his cock next. *And that is...* wow. Going down on him is constant jolts of heat bursting white-hot inside my mind, curling in my gut until I’m dripping with it, and finally, Caelan snaps.

With an utterly feral growl, he shoves me off him and onto my back on the sofa. He smiles, but tightly, something animalistic and needy in the expression.

He pins me down and tears my skirt and panties off, then his head is between my legs, and I cry out as his tongue laps at the entrance to my slick core.

“Caelan! Oh, fuck, Caelan...”

“Payback’s a bitch, ain’t it?” he says, a laugh buried somewhere amongst the pure want in his voice.

My back arches, legs spreading instinctively for him, and hands flying down to grip his head. I can’t work out if I’m trying to keep him there or push him away.

The worst of it is that damn tongue of his. A little too long and pointed to be quite human, flexible, and strong. He kisses my clit, then flicks his tongue against the sensitive nub. His tongue curls around it and teases until I’m trembling for him.

“Caelan,” I beg helplessly. I throw one arm up to cover my face, as if that’ll help me hide from the pleasure threatening to overwhelm me. My other hand tangles into Caelan’s hair and clutches tightly.

He lets his tongue slide lower, pressing against my wet, aching core again, then he’s curling it inside me.

Goddamn demon tongue. He sinks it all the way in, stroking me from the inside. And he can hit my sweet spot with it too, which he discovers when I let out a shocked, choked sob of pure pleasure and clench down around him.

He grins widely and uses the knowledge to his advantage. And he’s relentless. He keeps on eating me out, tongue tormenting me with the most awful bliss, and it’s not like I don’t deserve that after teasing him too, but he’s not *stopping*, and I can’t.

I beg for him, desperately gasping his name over and over. The pitch of my voice rises until I end up screaming as he makes me come.

My head falls back, eyes clenched shut, and thighs are trembling as my orgasm washes through me.

“G-goddammit... Caelan...” I moan breathlessly, groaning as he keeps

on teasingly licking at me.

Eventually, he draws back with lips slick with saliva and my cum, and a smug, heated grin on his face. But he's still hard as hell. Even harder than before, and there's a pure need in his eyes.

He wants me. And I want him.

"Please." I groan. "Just fuck me."

"Mmm... right here?" he asks. It sounds like he has no complaints about it if that's what I want.

"Don't care."

"Well, I do," Elias says, and I startle hard enough that I nearly fall right off the sofa. I don't know how I possibly have enough blood left in me for my face to get even redder, but I'm certain I must be blushing brighter than ever with the abrupt flush of heat rising to my cheeks.

"Nice of you to join us," Caelan drawls, infinitely amused. He seems to have been expecting Elias' arrival.

Now I think about it, I probably should have expected it too. He wasn't far away, only in the study again, and we were loud. Of course, he'd notice. If I hadn't been so distracted by orgasming and all, I would have been able to sense him approaching.

Still. Not like I mind.

"I think the bed would be more appropriate, don't you?" Elias suggests, eyes hungrily roaming over my naked form and Caelan shirtless above me.

I nod, biting my lip. I know what I really want. "Take me downstairs?" I request, and Elias raises an eyebrow.

"Shannon, are you sure? For your first time after being injured—"

"Please, Master."

Caelan laughs. "God, I adore you. Kinky little shit."

"We can go downstairs," Elias agrees slowly. "But do not expect us to play too hard with you just yet. You need time to adjust to and learn your new boundaries."

“That’s okay. I’d just like... to be collared and leashed again, maybe?”

I need the reaffirmation of their ownership of me after all the upheaval. Nothing has changed, yet everything is different.

Elias tilts his head, and the way he’s looking at me makes heat start pooling in my core all over again. “I think that much could be arranged.”

Caelan groans impatiently. “Give her whatever she wants. Just let me get my dick in her.”

Elias chuckles lowly but doesn’t reject Caelan’s sentiment. “Come, then, darling,” he says, beckoning me. I slide off the sofa and go to him as if entranced.

He doesn’t create a leash for me like he did last time. He only places his hand on the back of my neck with a grip like an iron fist in a velvet glove and guides me down to the basement.

“On the bed,” he murmurs, and I immediately oblige.

Caelan joins me, stripping off his jeans as he crawls after me and kisses me hotly. I wrap myself around him in delight, returning the affection every bit as enthusiastically. His cock is hard and leaking, pressing against my stomach.

I reach down to take him in my hand and stroke him, and he groans emphatically.

Elias pulls my attention away with a sharp smack to my thigh, one that makes me yelp in surprise, then giggle.

“Is this what you wanted?” he purrs. There’s a collar in his hand, not like the thin choker necklace I wear constantly, but a collar for play. Thick, buttery leather, with a sturdy buckle and a D-ring at the front that currently has a chain leash clipped to it. It’s not as delicate, but still pretty enough and clearly designed for hard use.

“Oh. Yes. Please.”

Elias smirks. His fingers caress my neck, and I tilt my head back for him with my heart fluttering in my throat. The next caress is from the leather as

Elias slides the collar into place. Once it's buckled securely, not tight enough to be uncomfortable or restrictive, but enough so that I'm very aware it's there, he brushes his lips against mine.

It makes my chest tighten, and my breathing picks up rapidly. The act itself is simple, but to Elias, it embodies his ownership of me, his claim, his control. I've always adored his dominating energy, but like this, I can feel it so much more intimately. Just how much he *knows* he owns me. His will to have me.

I've never wanted to submit more in my entire life.

Elias passes the leash to Caelan, not breaking eye contact with me the entire time. "Have your way with her, then," he says. And his self-satisfied, lustful smile informs me he's going to watch and enjoy every second.

Caelan must realize Elias' intent as well. He grins as he sits back against the headboard and tugs on my leash, guiding me into his lap. I gasp at the way the collar pulls around my neck.

"Face Elias, doll," Caelan commands roughly. "We're gonna put on a lovely li'l show for him since he's being such a smug bastard."

I nod and hurry to turn around. Caelan grabs my hip with one hand and yanks me back against him, and I can feel the length of his cock grind against my aching entrance. His other hand curls around the leash, pulling it tight, which turns my head so he can claim my mouth. His tongue ravages me, teeth pulling at my lips.

Caelan breaks away with a sharp, needy groan. "Elias. Get us a condom. *Now.*"

Elias raises an eyebrow at Caelan's tone. He probably wouldn't have refused, but I interject anyway.

"I don't want it. Want you to come inside."

Caelan's grin widens into something feral. "Yeah?"

"I want... need you to claim me." My voice is trembling with anticipation and desire. "Every way possible. Fill me up and mark me from the inside,

please. I'm yours, I swear."

He makes a low noise at that, somewhere between a moan and a growl. "Damn right you are."

I raise myself onto my knees, then the head of his cock is pressing against me. It's already slick, liberally drooling pre-cum, and I'm so wet and ready. I'm too impatient to wait, no, *Caelan's* too impatient to wait, but I feel every bit of that too.

I let gravity do the work, sinking and letting his hot, hard arousal stretch me open. I lean back against him, lips parting and eyes fluttering shut.

His hips thrust up into me, unable to hold back after being worked up so long, and I cry out.

Dammit. I love this. Love them. Love how it feels as his cock pumps into me, caught up in the heat and pleasure of it all.

Elias' eyes are on me, so utterly full of hunger, just watching as Caelan takes me. Caelan realizes it too, and he pulls me back by the leash to make me arch. He grips my hips and tilts the angle of them to give Elias an explicit view of where his cock sinks into my tight, wet heat.

"Look," he demands of Elias. "You wanna look, fuckin' look. Look at my cock in her."

I whine. It makes me feel so exposed, but when it's Elias watching, I don't mind. It's dirty as hell, so damn filthy, but in the most deliciously thrilling way. Seeing Elias' reaction, *feeling* his reaction of pure want, makes my cunt ache even more, clenching down around Caelan's erection until he growls.

And I watch in return. Elias smirks and makes a show of it as he gradually strips until he's in nothing but his boxers, then draws his cock out. He never takes his eyes off Caelan and me. Not making eye contact, no. He's looking lower, drinking in my bared breasts thrust out by the way Caelan has me arched against his chest, between my spread thighs where Caelan is joined with me in the most intimate way possible.

Elias strokes himself to the sight. Slow, firm pumps around his erection, breaths quickening, and quiet moans of appreciation for the pretty picture I make being used like that.

Caelan is loving it. He bites down on my shoulder just to make me jerk and whimper. He's making a show of the way he's fucking me, using a steady, unrelenting roll of his hips instead of just rutting into me animalistically. It makes his cock grind inside me, stroking insistently in the most delectable ways, and it's not long at all before I'm writhing and begging for him.

Elias calls my name in that deep, commanding voice that drips pure sex.

It takes some effort, fighting the instinct to let my head loll back and surrender to the things Caelan is doing to me, but I meet Elias' eyes. He's smirking, and that damn expression makes my breath catch.

"You're so gorgeous, Shannon," Elias murmurs lowly. He strips his boxers off and moves in close. So close I can almost feel his breath on my lips, and I moan quietly. "Such a good little pet for us."

"You feel so good," Caelan agrees, his cock slamming into me to punctuate the statement and making me cry out.

"Look at the way you take his cock. So desperate and needy for us."

"E-Elias..." I groan.

"You know who you belong to, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good girl." His hands rest against my knees, slowly trailing his fingers up my thighs until I tremble for him at the sensation. Until his hand is between my legs, and his thumb rubs against my clit. "What a good little whore you are. Just for us to use however we please."

Apparently, he's learned from when Caelan talked dirty to me after our anniversary dinner and how well I reacted to it. I still react well to it, eyes rolling back at his words and his touch.

My face is flushed and overheated. Part of me is embarrassed by being

praised in such a filthy way, but more than anything, it only turns me on more. I can't keep looking him in the eyes when he's talking like that. It's going to undo me.

I glance away, but Elias immediately grips my chin and jerks my head back around, forcing me to meet his gaze.

"Now, dear," he admonishes. "Look at me when I'm talking to you." He runs his fingers over my lips, then gently thrusts two into my mouth for me to suck on.

Oh, *God*.

It's too much. Caelan pounding into me, losing control now—harder, more erratic, his cock sending bursts of molten heat flooding through my veins. And his nails digging into my skin, his pleasure fueling my own. Elias *looking* at me like that, the way he smirks as he strokes my clit and watches me suggestively curl my tongue around his fingers, and the things he says.

"Do you want to get filled up with our cum like the pretty little slut you are?"

"Mmm... God, *please!*"

I clench down around Caelan almost involuntarily, so on edge, so close, and Caelan hisses. He thrusts roughly up into me, twice, three times more, and then his cock twitches and bucks inside me.

Caelan growls low, electrified groans and gasps as he releases inside me. Filling me up just like Elias promised they would. I can feel the sharp, peaked energy of his orgasm flood through me, dragging me down with him.

I moan for them in needy bliss. Caelan's arm wraps around me and holds me close against his chest, cock still shallowly thrusting into me, working me through my orgasm as my cunt hungrily milks him dry.

As soon as Caelan is spent, Elias takes my hips and lifts me into his lap. I can feel the warm gush of Caelan's cum as his cock slides free, leaking down my thighs, and Elias immediately pulls me down onto his own erection.

I shudder, gasping brokenly. It's still so sensitive, and the abrupt

penetration makes arousal spike sharply in my core. And being passed between them like this, it's like I am just a little toy for them, a thing to be used when we're in bed, and I love it. I can just imagine what it would be like to have them take turns with me, over and over, filling me up, then passing me over without even a second for me to breathe, and I moan helplessly at the thought.

"Shannon," Elias moans out, voice rough. He drives his cock into me, then smiles wickedly. "Do you hear it?" He rocks his hips, and it makes the filthiest wet noises. "How loose you are, all filled up with his seed?"

Fuck. "More. Please, I need more," I beg breathlessly.

Elias cups my face and presses his lips to mine. Then he takes hold of my collar. He flips our positions and lays me down on my back, tying the end of the leash through the bars of the headboard. He pins me down, and I spread my legs for him, and Elias rests his forehead against mine as he shoves back into me in this new position.

I can feel his breath, heavy and panting. The weight of his body. His cock, so thick and hard and filling me up in that way that feels like heaven. I lock my legs around him, holding his head between my hands, and he kisses me deeply as he begins to pound into me in earnest.

We're as close as we can get. Physically, but with his energy as well. Overwhelming and suffocating, except *not* because I'm still myself. It's not so much that he's taking over me but that we're one. Together.

It's so easy to get immersed in it. In him. My pleasure and his pleasure are entwined together just as much as our bodies are.

It's intimate in a way I don't even have words for, and in that moment, I know with absolute conviction that I belong to them. Completely and utterly.

Even as his cock keeps thrusting into me, melting my mind, Elias somehow slides a hand between us and rests his palm over the inky scar on my abdomen. "I *am* sorry—" he starts, but I cut him off with a breathless laugh.

“I wouldn’t change a thing.”

I mean it with utmost sincerity. They’re worth all of it.

Caelan tugs on the leash to direct my attention to him, pulling my head to the side. He kisses me while Elias fucks me to completion, both his and mine.

Pinned between them both, lavished with their affection and touch, I surrender to the pleasure, another orgasm shuddering through me as I gasp and murmur their names in rapture.

Surrender to them.

Elias’ eyes furrow shut, and he groans deeply as he comes, spilling out inside me, adding to the mess Caelan had already made. It feels so warm and full, knowing that both of them have claimed me so thoroughly.

I shudder. Caelan’s kiss, deep and hot, swallows my moan.

Yes.

Yes, yes, yes. I’m theirs.

Elias’ hands caress my heaving sides, soothingly stroking me as I tremble in the aftermath of the pleasure and exertion. He gradually slides his cock free from my used, cum-soaked hole. He moves lower down my body to kiss just below my ribcage, over the scar he’s left. I sigh and shiver.

Caelan brushes the sweat-slick bangs from my face and grins at me. “It’s good to have you back, doll.”

We curl together in the aftermath, so I can enjoy just being with them in the buzzing, satisfied silence as I allow my breathing to even out and my pulse to return to normal. I affectionately nuzzle Elias while Caelan litters my shoulders with gentle kisses. Elias takes my hand, and I twine my fingers together with his. They unclip the leash, but I ask to leave the collar on for a little while longer.

I’m able to walk when it comes to relocating, which makes a change. It’s still too much the middle of the day to sleep, and I’m not so worn out that a nap feels strictly necessary. I feel so satisfied, physically and emotionally.

I shower, then dress into comfy lounge clothes. That’s all I’m up to with

how soft I feel. But at the same time, I keep the leather collar. Then I go back to the living room, where Elias and Caelan have ended up.

They're together on one of the sofas in the living room, cleaned and dressed, and I immediately join the two and sprawl between them. They welcome me with open arms for more post-coital cuddles.

Elias picks up my ring from the table and returns it to me. I nod, allowing him to slide it back onto my finger. I'm doing a lot better now, and I feel nothing but pure contentment after being with them like that. But he's right. I should hang onto it.

"Hey," I say, tilting my head back as Caelan runs his clawed fingers through my hair. It makes for a very satisfying head massage, and I sigh in enjoyment. "I was thinking..."

"Mmm?" Elias prompts.

"I don't know if the offer is still open. I know we haven't really talked about it since. But you know, I... really would like to live here with you. As a permanent thing. If you'll have me."

Elias looks at me in surprise. "Even after—"

"Yeah, 'even after.'" I laugh. "I would have said yes anyway if you'd asked me that evening of our anniversary."

Elias tilts his head in consideration, but there's nothing untoward in the gesture. The idea isn't causing him the same conflict it did before. "This is your choice, and I will trust your judgment in the matter," he says firmly. It sounds like a conclusion he's come to after a lot of thinking it through, and I grin, kissing him. He's trying.

"Thank you."

"I just want to make sure you're certain. What will you do about your apartment and your education? Your job?"

I count them off on my fingers. "I have to give one month's notice on the contract for the apartment. I can put that in immediately. And Caelan said it would be okay if I used the car, right? This is my final semester. I can handle

the commute for the last few months. My job..." I wince a little at that one. "I don't know if they'd take me back after vanishing for two weeks, and honestly, I'm too anxious to ask about it. Can I just keep pretending I'm dead?"

Elias huffs a laugh. "No."

"Fine," I say, sticking my tongue out. "But, for real. I think... I'm going to resign. It was only a temporary entry-level position anyway. I needed it for experience and to cover the rent on the apartment, but if I'm living here, that won't be a problem anymore. I'll focus on finishing my degree and see what I can find to make an actual career out of after that."

"That sounds reasonable."

"I mean, I think pretending to be dead is also pretty reasonable," Caelan adds, and I grin.

"It is not."

"Compromise," I say. "They already think I was hospitalized, right? I'll say it's likely I'll be incapacitated for a bit and offer to resign. It's a legit reason."

"You don't need a reason, darling. You should be free to leave at any time."

I shrug. "I feel bad without one, though." And anyway, it's not exactly a lie. I'm starting to adjust, or stabilize, or whatever Elias terms it. I feel comfortable enough to go back to classes on Monday. But work is a more stressful beast, and I'm not sure if I'd be able to handle that on top of everything else.

"So, is that it then?" Caelan asks.

"I think we're all in agreement," Elias confirms.

A slow, wide grin spreads across Caelan's face, and he drags me into an abrupt, tight embrace that makes me squeak. "Oh, hell yeah! You're gonna live with us."

I laugh. His enthusiasm is infectious. I'd been turning the idea over in my

head most of the week, rationalizing everything so logically and actively trying not to get my feelings involved to the point that it never really sank in. I'm going to *live with them*.

Caelan enthusiastically pulls me off the sofa and spins me around before kissing me firmly. "This is gonna be so much fun."

Elias swipes a glancing blow to the side of Caelan's head, more teasing than anything. "This does not mean constant sex. She needs to work, as do you and I."

" 'Course, I know that. I ain't stupid. But we're still living together. That's kind of a big deal."

Elias smiles slowly. "Yes. I suppose it is."

"So. So, Shan, when are you moving in?"

I give him a wry grin. "I feel like I've already half moved in. Not much sense going back..."

"We'll help you arrange transportation for your belongings," Elias says, placing a hand on my back.

"Oh. Well, honestly. Not much need for that. The apartment was a furnished rental, so none of the furniture is mine, and it's so small I don't exactly have much stuff. I can get everything moved in one car trip. I can do it, maybe, this weekend sometime? If that's okay with you."

"Of course."

"Hey." Caelan purrs. He's still smiling wide enough that my cheeks hurt just looking at him. "We're gonna live together."

I giggle. "I know."

"We're, like... a proper thing."

"I think we've been a thing for a while," I tease.

"But moving in is all official and shit, like, a long-term arrangement."

For a moment, I can't place it. I've heard that phrase before. The very first night I spent with them. Caelan had talked about long-term arrangements with pets they got along with.

I'm certain this is far more than he ever had in mind, and the thought makes my heart skip.

I find myself mirroring his smile. "We're going to be together for good, right?"

Elias' hands slide over my shoulders, then he tilts my chin up and kisses me. "Assuredly. You are ours."

"And we ain't letting go," Caelan agrees.

"Forever," Elias says. There's still something the tiniest bit pensive in that sentiment. It's a statement of fact now that part of their souls is bound in mine. But I don't mourn for my past life at all.

Elias takes my hands and continues, strength in his conviction now. "But you will be at our side the entire time."

I smile and kiss him, then kiss Caelan as well. "There's nowhere else I'd ever want to be."

About the Author

Alessa Hale's love lies in dark and erotic romances. With over a decade experience in writing short, spicy stories, she has always enjoyed using fiction to explore searing character dynamics and unconventional desires.

Darkest Desires is her first full-length original novel. Alessa currently lives in the UK, but, wielding a heart full of wanderlust, has lived in five different countries so far, as well as traveling as often as possible.

She enjoys playing a game of her own devising, known as the scenic smut challenge, where she finds the most beautiful locations possible to pen some filthy fiction.



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