



Son of the

ARCH DEMON

POSSESSIVE LOVE

AMANDA MEUWISSEN

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AN MM PARANORMAL ROMANCE

POSSESSIVE LOVE

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Cover by Charli Childs at Cosmic Letterz

Edited by Sarah Coppin at www.manoreditingservices.com

Book layout by Amanda Meuwissen

Formatting by Delaney Rain Author Services

Printed in the United States of America

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CHAPTER ONE

First, let me tell you about the day I died.

Then we can get to the good stuff.



*W*icked cool!”

My pencil leapt from my hand like I’d pushed it down onto a springboard.

“Oops!” Eryn caught it midair with a giggle. “Sorry, Avi.”

She joined me at the picnic table in front of the Commons building where I’d been furiously sketching. I didn’t usually draw out in the open, but most people passing through the grounds didn’t linger when it was only mid-fifties out.

My mind had been prickly all morning, making my fingers twitch to get something down on paper. They were feeling a little numb now. I had my oversized black beanie pulled down over my ears, and an equally oversized hoodie layered over my work shirt for later, but I couldn’t draw while wearing gloves.

Not only my mind, but all of me was prickly today. Itchy, even—my temples, my back, the base of my spine. Probably because it was my birthday.

I hated my birthday.

“Hey, Eryn,” I said with a quivering smile, as she handed my pencil back. I’d been so focused on drawing that her arrival had my heart rate at about one-twenty.

Eryn Schiffer was the closest thing I had to a best friend. She *was* my best friend, but also so out of my league friendship wise that I often wondered why she bothered with me. If I’d been straight, we never could have become friends. I would have fawned over her and fumbled my words just like every other guy who tried talking to her. That’s how I acted around guys I liked.

Eryn was a huge gamer, goth, anime nerd, like I was, and we’d known each other as online friends and guildmates for years before meeting in person. She was also gorgeous. Social rankings could always be blurred for the good looking.

Not that I was hideous or anything, but I might as well have been invisible compared to Eryn. She was the sort of radiant force that movies personified as the “It girl,” with long strawberry blond hair, amber eyes that shimmered like copper, creamy skin, and a figure worthy of a swimsuit catalog.

“Hey.” Fry sat down beside her, Eryn’s boyfriend, the one guy who had been able to talk to her—or so I assumed. He didn’t talk much around me. Around anyone else really. But if Eryn was the “It girl” then Fry was the “It guy.”

Quiet, studious, and equally athletic, Godfrey “Fry” Johnson was like the glow-up version of... well, me. We were both blond, more ashen than Eryn’s strawberry, both with light eyes, though his were paler blue than mine, and while my hair was always unkempt and flattened to my head from constant wearing of the beanie, his was a perfect coif. He wore glasses, which I didn’t, but they were stylish frames, blue to match his eyes. And he was tall. I was maybe five-nine and generally small, skinny, *weak*. Fry was built like a swimmer—because he was one.

“Are you seeing this, Fry?” Eryn gushed over my drawing, tilting the pad sideways on the table to better look at it. I guess it was pretty good. I hadn’t stopped to take it all in yet, just

scribbled away to get the lines and details from my mind to translate on paper.

It would maybe be a little disturbing to some, depicting a figure with a handsome face, but with horns, sharp teeth, and a body crafted from bone.

“You are so talented, Avi! Isn’t he talented?” She nudged Fry’s shoulder, and he nodded benignly. “Why aren’t you doubling as an Art major again?”

Because I couldn’t afford the extra classes, and I was already on track to be a super senior next summer, trying to squeeze in what classes I could afford. “One major is plenty, and focusing on business is more practical. This is just for fun.” Until I could make a living from it.

My plan was to get a better job after graduation, something basic but with higher pay than what I did now, being a cashier at a convenience store, and work toward building a business freelancing until I had enough of a portfolio and steady work to make doing art my full-time job. It wouldn’t always be art I loved, but it would be art, something I could escape into when the rest of the world was a little too much.

Which was often.

“From *Diablo*?” Fry asked.

“Not on purpose, just... something from my head.” I flipped closed the cover and tucked the pad into my backpack.

“Well, you have a very talented head.” Eryn snickered again and gave a snort at the unintended innuendo. As if I knew whether that was true. The only talent my head got up to was how quickly it could go off before my dad got home from work.

I was a townie, so I lived down the hill from campus in the house I grew up in. Saved on tuition and didn’t require me to have a car. I rode my bike everywhere, though that was common in Vale, being a smaller town, mostly made up of its two college campuses—St. Ignatius on the hill, and Vale Tech across the river.

“And now...” Eryn drum-rolled, and then produced a plastic container she pushed across the table toward me. “*Happy bir—*”

I stopped her from singing with a press of my fingers to her lips. At least she hadn’t lit a candle, but there was definitely a cupcake in that box. “You remember it is my literal nightmare to be sung to in public, right?”

Eryn huffed, pouting behind my hands. I removed them to find Fry shaking his head and softly smiling. At her being adorable or me being a mess, who knew.

Any kind of attention was basically torture for me. I didn’t “people” well. If ten seconds was enough to adore Eryn, then it was more than enough for someone to loathe me. Or at least to think of me a pathetic pushover who was usually easier to ignore. Or pity me for being a townie who still needed to work to scrape by for tuition money because financial aid wasn’t enough.

Eryn never pitied me. She’d scooped me up and kept me under her wing when we were middle schoolers playing *Diablo III*, just randomly having invited me to join her party in-game. Turned out she was from a city not far from Vale, and we had a lot in common, enough that she’d chosen the same college partially just for us to meet.

She was the first person I told I was gay, the one who convinced me to tell my dad, who she’d been right about when she said he’d be supportive. She’d tried setting me up with guys a few times too, but I always screwed it up. I’d talk too much or not enough or about the wrong things, and they’d lose interest before the end of our first date. Eryn still invited me to join parties and guilds for other online games, with Fry occasionally now too, ever since they started dating Freshman year.

I was pretty sure they were going to become a statistic. Iggy’s—what everyone who went to St. Ignatius actually called this place—had a ridiculously high rate of marriages if a couple was still dating through graduation.

“Fine.” Eryn crossed her arms with a more exaggerated pout. “I’m already saving your real present for later. Which, when can I even give it to you? You work tonight, don’t you?”

“I have to.” The store was at the bottom of the hill along the highway through town, and though I worked a few more days a week than I would have liked, it usually got quiet at night and allowed me plenty of time to study or draw.

“But it’s your birthday!” she said too loudly, considering a few passing people I recognized from various classes turned to look at us—and probably wondered what Eryn was doing with *that weirdo* Avi Dermot. “It’s your twenty-*first* birthday.”

“I know, but none of us even drink that much.” Other than a glass of spiked punch or a beer here and there at parties Eryn dragged me to, where I usually ended up in a corner on my phone.

“But now you can do it legally with the rest of us! You’re at least coming to the Chi Alpha Sigma Halloween party on Saturday, right?”

Urg. I hated those guys. Fry was the only one of them I could stand.

They weren’t awful, not like horrible hazing assholes, but they were all so... perfect. Good looking, smart, and most without needing a dime of financial aid. Like Brent, the now frat president. Anytime he asked me for something, whether to copy my notes when he missed a class, or for what was basically free commissioned artwork ever since he caught me doodling in Psych 101, I couldn’t say no.

“Halloween was yesterday,” I reminded her.

“On a Tuesday, boo. Ha! Boo!” Eryn splayed her fingers in festive jazz-hands. “But seriously, what better way to celebrate your birthday than in costume?”

“Eryn—”

“*Avi.*”

Chimes sounded through the campus grounds, alerting us that we had ten minutes until the start of our next class.

Eryn snatched up my backpack and put the cupcake box inside as we got up from the table. It was sweet of her to have gotten it for me, and no matter how many times I shied away from being socialized like a feral cat, she never gave up, never considered me a lost cause, or moved on. She really was my best friend.

“Thank you for the cupcake,” I said and kissed her cheek. We weren’t that different in height with her wearing platform goth chick boots. She looked like an anime schoolgirl, with a short, pleated skirt, white button-down, and tie, and what I assumed was one of Fry’s flannels as her jacket.

“Happy birthday, man,” Fry said, quietly at least, and offered me a quick fist-bump.

“And think about Saturday.” Eryn attached herself to Fry’s arm, though I was pretty sure their next classes were in opposite directions. “Or if you want a celebratory drink or something when you get off work, we will leap to join you wherever you want to go, no matter how late it is. Right, Fry?”

“Of course.”

“Sure, I... I might take you up on that.”

I waved as they headed off—and then had to part at a fork in the sidewalk. Even if Fry wasn’t much of a talker, he was a good friend too. It wasn’t their fault I hated my birthday. But who wouldn’t?

If your mother died in childbirth.

Technically, it wasn’t my birthday until nine-forty-two at night—when I’d come into the world, and my mother left it. That was the one thing I’d never told Eryn. All she or anyone else knew was that it was just me and my dad.

I turned toward Holland Hall for my class on Ethics, Economics, and the Marketplace. I had to have at least one class outside my Business Major that was still related to it, and something from the Philosophy track had seemed like it might be fun. Though I suppose moral philosophy wasn’t what most people considered fun.

Much of the grounds and buildings were still decorated for Halloween, with fake cobwebs in the trees, and vampire, witch, or other monster cutouts in the windows. The entire way across campus, I kept scratching my head through my beanie, itching back between my shoulder blades, and down my lower back beneath the line of my jeans. I didn't usually itch like this, even when peopled out, but that prickly feeling was getting worse. Maybe it was my detergent? I didn't think Dad had picked up anything different from usual, but if I didn't have something to distract me, I couldn't seem to stop scratching.

I pulled out my Ethics notebook as soon as I sat down in class. Most people had laptops or iPads, but I liked to be able to doodle while taking notes, and I'd never warmed to using a stylus. For a higher-level Philosophy course, the class was pretty full and took up one of the larger lecture halls with stadium seating. There were still enough empty seats that my usual spot was always open and not directly next to anyone else.

Maybe I *was* a lost cause and didn't put myself out there enough to make friends or do more than daydream about the guys I liked, but it wasn't that big of a campus. I felt like everyone had already made up their minds about me, especially if they were also townies and remembered me from grade school. I was the quiet freak who kept to himself and drew weird pictures while huddled in dark corners. There wasn't anyone left to take a chance on a small, mousy, introverted nerd, who—

“Quick announcement, everyone! Finish taking your seats, please.”

Who...

Who the hell was *he*?

Down at the front of the class beside Professor Townsend was the most gorgeous guy I had ever seen outside a movie poster. Tall, at least six-two, trim but still built, with biceps stretching his tight green T-shirt like he could swoop me into his arms in one go and pin me up a wall.

I needed to not think like that in public, because it made me shift in my seat to keep from springing to attention like a twelve-year-old. He had such incredible skin though, medium brown like rich suede, and dark hair that looked reddish under the lights. His face was literally perfect. That flawless symmetry that everyone says is what makes people attractive? He had it. There was this prettiness to him, clean-shaven, sculpted brows, perfect bowed lips, and a straight defined nose, yet he was still so masculine, so... Greek god-like that I couldn't look away.

“Class, this is Marc... Smith?” Professor Townsend turned to him.

“Smythe, actually.”

And he was *English*. That accent in a sultry baritone went straight to my crotch, and I had to shift in my seat again.

“Smythe,” the professor corrected. “A late transfer, especially for a senior, but I'm sure any of you will be willing to help him get up to speed should he ask.”

I saw several girls and a handful of guys look very eager to volunteer.

“Meanwhile, he will be working hard to complete all your previous assignments from this year so far, so don't go thinking he gets to skip ahead. You can find a place to sit, Mr. Smythe. We'll chat again after class.”

Marc nodded, and I watched him scan the lecture hall for empty seats.

His eyes caught mine, and he started heading up the steps toward my row.

Don't sit next to me. Don't sit next to me.

He sat next to me.

And he smelled amazing, with a gentle waft of spicy cologne.

“Hello, mate,” he said in a delicious whisper. “Mind if I peek over yer shoulder today? Ya look like you keep good notes.”

I did. Sort of. Though my notebook was mostly filled with doodles and my notes wrapped around the images in an order that only I would understand. “U-um... yes? Sure. Yeah. Okay.”

Fuck.

His eyes were almost the color of his hair, dark but reddish, like sandstone with actual sparkles glittering in them. Professor Townsend had already started lecturing, and as Marc leaned closer, I felt the side of his knee hit mine.

My cock pulsed, and I squeezed my thighs together to get it to behave. I was going to hyperventilate and pass out right into Marc’s lap.

“Ya gonna... open up for me then?”

“H-huh?”

Marc grinned, and I melted. I was pretty sure my beanie had caught fire from the excess heat in my face, and the places that had been itching earlier felt even more tingly. “The notebook? So I can see yer notes?”

“Right! S-sorry.” I flipped it open, which naturally went to a page with anatomy study sketches—which was what I chose to call it when I drew Captain America’s ass over and over at different angles.

I flipped quickly to a more recent page. A slightly less embarrassing doodle encompassed this one: a gargoyle wing with my notes about the history of fair trade along the membranes.

“Ain’t you the talented one,” Marc said, close enough to puff air on my neck.

Instant goosebumps—and another twitch from my cock.

This was going to be a very long class.



IT WAS. Possibly the longest Ethics had ever felt, with Marc occasionally whispering other things to me throughout the lecture, which were half suggestions for notes to add, but also half complimentary about my drawing, my beanie, my stupid hoodie that had an M-shaped anarchy symbol with a black cat in front of it and said *Meowarchy*. I almost wondered if I'd been transported into one of those *She's All That* kind of movies and this would turn out to be a bet at my expense.

Especially when class ended and Marc said, "Mind if I get a bit more rundown from ya after my chat with the prof? Meet ya outside? Buy you a cuppa?"

Scratch that. Thank *God* I was wearing my Meowarchy hoodie, because it was long enough to cover how embarrassingly hard I still was. "No. I mean I don't mind! I-I don't... have any other classes today."

"Me either, luck would have it. See ya in a tick." He winked, and I was grateful he was on the side nearest the stairs so he had to get up first and hopefully wouldn't see my legs wobble when I followed him.

I was certain I was huffing, gasping for breath when I finally got out of the lecture hall to wait for Marc. How was I going to carry on a conversation with that unbelievable specimen without the buffer of a classroom and someone talking over us? He was probably just being nice and legit thought I'd be a good source of info since I looked like a nerd.

Well, maybe more of an outcast, loner, *loser*, given the black beanie, oversized sweatshirt, and Captain America's ass all over my notebook. But then why would he choose me? He couldn't possibly actually be... interested.

"Dermot! Just the talent I was looking for."

Shit. It was Brent—and three of his frat bro flunkies.

Again, not assholes, but...

Yeah, sometimes they were assholes.

"Brent. Hi. Uh... talent?" I slipped on the other strap of my backpack, so I wasn't one-shouldering it and inviting them to have me get my drawing pad out. That's how I'd ended up

with a Tree of Life drawing I'd done based on one of the oldest and largest oaks on campus as their Homecoming poster.

Brent was really good looking, which made it harder to say no to him. All the frat guys had nice bodies, since Chi Alpha Sigma was an athlete focused fraternity, with swimmers like Fry, divers, runners, and the like. But Brent had that extra dose of *handsome* and was unfairly disarming when he loomed over me and rested his forearm on the wall above my head. He was straight, or at least dating a girl, and definitely knew I was gay. If my sweatshirt wasn't covering my half-chub from Marc, he probably would have thought it was for him.

And it maybe had been once or twice, which just made me hate him more.

“We need a poster for the Halloween party on Saturday.”

Of course they did. “Um—”

“It's short notice, I realize, and you know I wouldn't ask ___”

Yes, he would.

“—but it's our most important party of the year—”

It always was.

“—and the money we could bring in would be killer for kickstarting senior fundraising for charity.”

Charity—which was why I should feel *honored* to create something pro-bono. “Brent—”

“We've spent way over budget, so funds are a little strapped to pay you anything, but you know you are totally invited, and no cover charge necessary for our poster boy.”

That was something, since to get around the whole charging for drinks thing, they took cash at the door and then gave drinks away for free. But that was like five or ten bucks. I should be charging hundreds for the type of work I gave Brent, which Eryn constantly reminded me of, and even Fry had said something once, at least enough for, “Dude, charge next time.”

Or I could say no.

Say no, Avi.

“I wish I could help—”

“You would be saving my ass. No one else could get something stellar done fast enough, and we need to get posters printed tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow! Brent—”

“I’ll own you big time. And it can be anything you want to draw, so long as it’s spooky.”

Well... I was going to be stuck at work all night. “I... I mean, maybe—”

“You are incredible.” Brent pushed from the wall, and I swear I heard his frat brothers snickering. “Catch up with you later? *You...*” He did little finger guns at me as he backed away. “Seriously the best.”

Yeah, best pushover.

Again.

I scratched through my beanie, on both sides, just above my temples. The itchiness was worse there, but the weight of my backpack seemed to be helping with the spots between my shoulders and down my lower back. Maybe it was my anxiety making me itch, though if it was, I’d be itchy every day. I didn’t have too much studying to do tonight, I supposed, and if I could draw anything I wanted, it might be fun. And it was still practice, even if I wasn’t being paid.

Damn it. If I was going to freelance someday, I really needed to grow a backbone.

What if that was all Marc wanted too? My notes, my art skills for something he’d subtly request after pretending to chat me up, and then he’d be off to make time with someone more on his level. I certainly wasn’t.

This was stupid. It was my birthday, I was waiting for a hot guy who’d asked to spend more time with me, and all I

could feel was a knot in my stomach that made me want to bolt—

And then, like no one else could possibly have managed, fidgeting in place during my impromptu freakout, I *tripped* over my own feet, and the weight of my backpack sent me careening toward the floor.

“Whoa! Tryin’ to leg it, mate?” Strong arms caught me before I’d passed the forty-five-degree angle, and when I was propped upright, Marc stood over me, holding my shoulders. Experiencing our height difference this close reminded me of imagining him hefting me up a wall.

Marc’s pearly teeth were perfectly straight but with the sort of canines that looked like fangs and were seriously so hot. If he hadn’t been holding my shoulders, my knees would have buckled.

“Didn’t think my offer for a cuppa was such a turn off.”

“I-I wasn’t... I-I just...” I took a breath. I *was* capable of forming words. “I... may have been psyching myself out while waiting for you, but I am definitely on board with taking you up on that offer.”

“Psyching yerself out?” Marc questioned, with little think lines forming between his brows like he maybe didn’t get the wording. Then he grinned again and squeezed my shoulders with rotations of his thumbs, lightly massaging them. “No need to worry. If ya think I only wanted yer notes, I’m actually more interested in the cuppa. Maybe coffee? Some other bevvy and buy ya a pint?”

There went my knees again.

He was asking me out.

Was he asking me out?

“C-cuppa means... tea, right? ’Cause that is an absolute yes, especially if it’s herbal. I think that might be better than caffeine or alcohol right now, since I’ve been a little wired today.”

Marc was still rubbing my shoulders but finally stopped with a firm pat and drew his hands away. “Tea it is. On me, but ya’ll have to show me where to go. Oh! And one other thing I need from ya.”

Then he... did want something? “Yes?”

Marc laughed and threw an arm around my shoulders. “Yer name, mate! Ya never told me yer name.”



“YOU’VE BEEN to the museum? In Switzerland?” I was so jealous, I had long since forgotten to worry about my usually socially inept sabotage ruining this.

Marc and I sat in a thankfully quiet corner of the campus café. It was in the Commons building beneath the main cafeteria and served faster food than upstairs, like sandwiches, soup, and pastries. Marc *had* gotten tea, but with no sign of anything non-caffeinated, he ordered me steamed milk with vanilla and cinnamon shots. I had never been so grateful to not be lactose intolerant, because it tasted amazing.

We’d started by going over Ethics notes, since he did need to catch up, but that had led to questions about my doodling on every page, and Marc mentioned there was quite a bit of H.R. Giger inspiration, which was true! I loved Giger’s work. The designs from *Alien*, *Species*, *Necronomicon*. He was a brilliant artist, iconic in how he mixed human elements with mechanical or other hardscapes, finding the surreal in things and making it tangible.

I might have used that line in an Art History paper once, but because I believed it.

“It’s brilliant! Twisted stuff,” Marc said, not shying from my weirdness but seeming excited whenever we stumbled upon something new we had in common, just like it had been with Eryn—only this was *so different* from with Eryn.

The heat in my gut and tightness in my jeans had calmed somewhat, though not completely. It was just so fun talking to Marc. Even if I said something awkward or started rambling, he'd laugh and go with it.

“There's this one statue of an alien, right, like from *Alien* alien, and he's on all fours as if he's ready to get properly boffed, tail up and everything.” Marc stopped and laughed again, rubbing the back of his neck like he was the one who'd said something awkward this time. “That's weird my mind went there, innit?”

“N-no! Not at all.” I leaned forward, my milk and his tea long gone but the conversation far from dwindling. “Okay, *this* might sound weird, but I kind of always found the aliens attractive. Predator too.”

“Get out!” Marc mirrored me, leaning equally into my space. “Those dreads can get it, right? Little hair tendrils? All in for me. Even kinda like the mandibles.” He curled his fingers up by either side of his mouth like the mime of extra fangs.

I laughed. He was so easy to be around. His accent, his smile, his charm.

His body. I was certain I'd conjured this guy from my most detailed wet dreams.

“Just a doodler though, are ya?” Marc asked.

I hadn't taken out my drawing pad, but now I really wanted to show him more of my work. I set my backpack on the table and pulled out the pad to flip to the drawing from earlier.

“*You* did that?” Marc asked in awe.

“I thought it would be neat, you know? A perfect face but with a demonic twist.”

“What a charmer.” He smirked. When I wasn't sure what to say, he held up the pad beside his head. “Ya don't see the resemblance?”

He was joking, but the face did kind of look like him—the shape of the nose and chin and brows. “Wow...”

“Not *too* much, I hope!” He chuckled. He brought the pad down again to continue paging through it.

“You don’t... want one, do you?” I asked. Stupidly. Paranoidly. “A drawing?”

“Oh, um...” Marc frowned, pausing at one picture of a sort of biomechanical librarian with a misshapen head and tentacles for their lower half, paging through an ornate tome. “I’d commission ya in a heartbeat, mate. Don’t have much cash on me, so might have to wait. This bloke’s worth at least a few Benjamins, yeah?” He looked up and bobbed his eyebrows at me. “Plus tip, of course. Wouldn’t want to thank ya for yer service without a proper... tip.” I wanted so badly to read into that, the little tease, the flirting, and when he reverently closed my drawing pad, not asking for anything, I truly believed he only wanted me. “Someday, eh?”

“Yeah...” I reached to pull the pad back from him, but our hands brushed, and Marc clung to mine with a quick coil of his fingers. My heartbeat stuttered. Maybe small, mousy, introverted nerds were his type. A freak like me could dream, and I felt a tingle travel up my arms from where his thumbs caressed my knuckles. It even helped keep me from feeling itchy everywhere.

“So...” Marc said like the start of a question.

My eyes caught sight of the clock behind him, and everything screeched to a halt. “Shit!” I leapt up, tearing my hands from his hold. “I am so sorry! I had no idea we’d been here for so long. I’m going to be late for work if I don’t head out right now.”

“Oh. Sure, yeah. Sure,” he said with obvious disappointment. *Disappointment* in having less time with me. “Whatever ya gotta do.”

“I am really sorry,” I said again, hurriedly grabbing my backpack to slip the drawing pad inside, only my franticness

knocked the pack sideways, and out slid the container with the cupcake from Eryn.

Marc picked it up. The container was clear plastic, perfectly cupcake shaped to hold the treat in place without the frosting getting messed up, which I hadn't looked at closely before, but now Marc read it out loud. "Twenty-one? Not like... it's yer birthday?"

I felt like such a goon for having a milestone birthday and only my part-time job planned to celebrate it. "Uh... yeah?"

"And ya didn't want a pint, you good boy?"

The heat in my face shot right to my groin at hearing him call me *that*. He handed the cupcake back to me.

"Heading out for a rager after work then?"

"Probably not. I don't usually do much on my birthday."

"No? When'd ya get off then?"

I fumbled with putting everything back into my bag. "Um... ten. Why?"

"Ten is early. What say I pick ya up, take the birthday boy out for that pint after all?"

"You... really?"

"Really." Marc moved around the table to stand beside me.

Eryn and Fry wanting to buy me a drink, while super sweet, made me feel like a third wheel. But Marc...

They'd understand.

They'd probably high five.

"Okay!" I blurted. "I mean... if you want to. It's a store just down the hill, at the bottom of the main road where it hits the highway. Ole's? But I won't be mad if you don't show up."

"Trust me, mate," Marc said in his low, sultry register, "I'll be there." He leaned closer, and my heart either came to a stop or ricocheted so fast it burst, because there was nothing in the world, certainly nothing in the café at that moment, other than Marc's lips pressing to my cheek.

He even hovered near me before pulling away and *sniffed*, inhaling the scent of me as if he liked it. Which I hoped he did, because I could not remember if I'd washed my hair today, even though it was squished beneath my beanie.

“See ya soon, Avi,” he purred, and if I'd had any choice at all, I would have called in sick to work right then and asked to go with him, wherever he wanted to take me.

“Y-yeah. Soon.”



FUN FACT: biking with a hard-on is *not* fun. But at least it was a short ride down the hill. And I wasn't that late. I was even able to finally calm my dick down enough that when I took off my sweatshirt to just be in my polo, I no longer had to worry about keeping my embarrassment covered.

The manager didn't mind if I wore my beanie during work, which was good, considering my hair would have been a travesty, and I still wanted to look somewhat presentable when Marc picked me up.

For our date.

Second date?

It was totally a date!

Maybe my birthday didn't have to be a disaster every year.

The first few hours of my shift were always busy. Students coming by after finishing classes, business people getting gas after work, travelers stopping on their way through town before the sun went down. I didn't get the chance to check my phone until almost seven, planning to message Eryn about the unbelievably good day I was having and how, thanks but no thanks on the after-work drink, because I had a *date*.

First, though, I had to answer my dad's birthday text.

He probably sent it right when he woke up, but I would have been in class. Dad was a machine operator for a local cereal manufacturing plant. When certain cereals were being produced, the whole town smelled like a bakery. His hours could be all over the place, and he'd had the night shift all week, so morning was after lunch for him. He'd worked at the plant my entire life but never seemed to get a real raise or any promotions when one came up. He was still loyal to the company though since the work was steady.

Hey, Champ! Happy 21st! There's a surprise waiting for you when you get home. We'll find some time to properly celebrate this weekend, okay? Don't go crazy if you go out after work! Love you. <3

He wouldn't see my text until whenever his next break was, but I replied:

Thanks, Dad! Love you too! And I won't go crazy. Maybe just something quiet with my friends.

Or one friend.

Who I hoped wasn't just a *friend*.

I realized I hadn't thought to give Marc my number or get his, so any downtime I had from that point on made me super fidgety. And itchy again. It didn't feel like there was a rash or reason for all the itching, but those same spots kept bothering me if I was idle for too long. My lower back, between my shoulders, and just above both temples. I didn't want to keep scratching too much through my beanie, or the next time I took it off, there might be tufts of blond hair left behind. I was probably just nervous.

And excited.

When it finally passed nine o'clock, with less than an hour left before closing, traffic had slowed enough that I pulled out my sketchpad. No studying tonight. I couldn't possibly concentrate. So, I flipped to a new page past the one of the demonic man and started sketching that same perfect face. Only this time, I tried to make it even more like Marc's. I still

sort of wanted to give him sharp teeth and made his fangs pointier than the truth. I also started drawing a new style of horns from his head before I realized I wasn't keeping it as realistic as I'd planned.

DING.

I folded the previous page back over, wondering if it might be—

Brent.

“Hey there, Dermot.”

And a gaggle of frat guys.

Including Fry! Thank God.

Fry waved, and I was fairly confident he wouldn't say anything about it being my birthday. He knew I wouldn't want the attention.

Some of the others seemed tipsy, Brent among them, and were clearly here for refills, given they headed straight for the beer fridge.

“Hey,” Fry said, approaching me first. “Obligatory beer run. DD. Buy you one later?”

Those were almost full sentences, which was a lot for Fry. “Actually, I've been sort of distracted and hadn't texted you or Eryn yet, but... I have plans.”

Fry brightened. “Friend or... fun?”

“Fun?” I rocked up onto my toes. “I think?”

“Good for you, bud.” He gently punched my shoulder. “I'll tell Eryn.” He headed back to the exit, while his friends getting beer brought their spoils to the counter.

I rang them up quickly, looking forward to no longer having most of Chi Alpha Sigma cramping my style when my *date* was fast approaching.

“Is that for me? This is perfect!”

Brent's glassy eyes had landed on my drawing pad—on the drawing from earlier that I *liked*, that Marc had liked, and I

absolutely did not want it to be used for—

“Thanks, Dermot. You’re speedy as ever. We can handle the typography once we scan it and get posters printed pronto.”

“Brent, that wasn’t suppos—”

“It’s perfect,” he said again, already tearing it out of the pad and rolling it up to steal it from me. “I’ll make sure you get the original back when we’re done.”

No, he wouldn’t. I never got the Tree of Life back, and the only remaining version was copies of the Homecoming poster that said: *How does a coniferous tree get ready for the homecoming dance?*

They spruce themselves up.

It wasn’t even a coniferous tree!

“Brent!” I tried calling after him as he hurried away, bro and beer in tow. I couldn’t rush out after them and cause a scene. Fry might back me up, but I’d only make things worse between me and those assholes. I didn’t want that kind of grief on my birthday, with forty-five minutes left of my shift and a really, really amazing gift from the cosmos poised to pick me up.

I felt even worse when Fry, who clearly didn’t know what had happened, turned to wave at me again before crowding into his car to drive his friends back up the hill.

It didn’t really matter. I was already halfway through drawing the other version, a better version maybe, one that I might... possibly give to Marc. But a print of it! In case this whole thing ended up being a fluke or went up in flames, I wanted something to remember him by.

The next few minutes were quiet again, and after ninety-three, I started getting anxious. *More* anxious. Okay, so on edge that I might have been spinning. I had to constantly keep my hands busy, or they would seek one of those itchy spots on my body again, and at this point, I was going to make myself raw. I didn’t need welts anywhere to turn Marc off. I didn’t want anything to screw this night up.

If he showed.

Oh, please still show.

I decided to take the trash out a little early before closing time. If someone came in, I'd only miss them by about thirty seconds. The two large trash bags were each the size of me, but not horribly heavy. I lugged them out to the dumpster behind the store, hefting in one and then the other with a huff. Then I checked my phone while I stood in the alley, moving away from the dumpster smell to get a fresh breath of air, and stared at the time.

Nine-forty-one. Huh. My actual time of birth was only one minute away.

Happy birthday to me.

“Yo. We’re gonna need the keys to that register, kid.”

I snapped my head up, assuming it was Brent and the frat bros back, goofing around to torture me. But these were no twenty-somethings. They looked forties. Maybe? And rough, like really rough, like the type of biker guys or gang members from movies who...

Pulled knives on unsuspecting convenience store cashiers. The leader did, the one who'd spoken. Another guy had a pipe or crowbar or something. And a third had a gun. He didn't draw it but flashed it at me from inside his jacket—a fucking *gun*.

“I-I-I—”

“Y-y-you,” the leader mocked me, walking up with his really, really big knife pointed at my throat, “are going to hand over the keys and any cash or valuables you have on your person.”

I had my phone in my hand. I could dial 911.

No. That would be stupid. You were supposed to give over whatever a robber asked for, right? Don't make things worse?

“Now!”

His bellow startled me, and my phone dropped from my shaking fingers, landing right on its corner, and causing its case to pop off and maybe crack the screen.

“Keys, wallet, and anything else of value,” the leader repeated threateningly, moving closer to press the tip of his knife against my Adam’s apple. If I swallowed, it would cut me.

My head burned. My back did too. Was I hyperventilating? Having a panic attack? I couldn’t move, but all the places that had been itching me all day suddenly throbbed. My hands twitched, desperate to reach for one spot or another.

“*Don’t* make any moves unless it’s slowly into a pocket.”

“I-I... p-p-please, I... I need to—” I couldn’t help it. I had to scratch my back, my head, something, I had to, or I felt like my bones were going to burst out of me.

I swung my hand behind my back to dig up between my shoulder blades, but the itch, the heat, the *pain* was even worse.

“He’s going for a weapon!”

What? No, I—

The leader thrust the knife forward into my throat.

I was dead. I was going to die.

I felt blood start to gurgle and fill my windpipe almost immediately. Soon, I wouldn’t be able to breathe. I’d choke on my own blood until I passed out, *bled* out, and was a lifeless body in the alley for someone to find.

Like Marc.

Don’t come! Don’t come while they’re still here!

“Get the keys from his belt!”

“Shit, that’s a lot of blood...”

“You idiot, what are we gonna do now?”

“Get the keys!”

I pulled the knife from my throat, which logically I knew was the stupidest choice. Never pull the knife out. You never pull it out! But the feeling of metal stuck there had been unbearable, and if I was going to bleed out anyway, I wanted it to be quick.

Please, let it be over quick...

I dropped to my knees as the knife clattered to the ground out of my hands, probably right next to my busted phone. Somehow, the pain in my head and back were still worse than a knife wound in my jugular. I needed my beanie off. My shirt off. I had to escape that feeling.

I flung the beanie from my head with a rush of cool air easing at least some of that strange heat. Then I gripped the top of my polo and pulled—ripping it right down the center. How did I do that? It was thick fabric with only three buttons at the top, but I'd totally shredded it.

“What the hell is he doing?”

“Get his *keys!*”

“Dude, he’s... what the hell?”

What? I wondered. I could still think. I could still breathe. I'd lost a lot of blood, but that gurgling, choking feeling was fading. I reached hesitantly to touch my neck, but I couldn't feel the cut anymore. My neck was wet and sticky, but not oozing, and I couldn't find the wound.

My vision tunneled, like adjusting a microscope, blurry and then crystal-clear, zoomed in even, until I could see tiny bits of plastic flecks in the cement that had cracked off my phone screen as close as if I'd fallen face-first beside them. But I was still on my knees, and my head... my head, my back, I—

“Yahhhhhhhh!” I howled as the heat and pain exploded in a final burst like I'd been shot. Had I been shot? Had that guy pulled his gun and ended my misery? But no. The pain was in too many places, above my temples like something had sprouted from my head, and the same between my shoulders and at the base of my spine.

“Holy fuck! Holy fuck! What the *fuck* is he?”

I reached behind me first to the line of my jeans. There was something cylindrical attached to me, thinner than the width of one of my wrists, and as I followed it from where it seemed to have grown out of my back, it tapered smaller and moved in my hand, allowing me to feel the whole length of it, like an undulating snake.

A tail.

I had a tail.

Hands shaking now, I reached between my shoulders. The growths there that had torn through the remains of my shirt were thicker, firmer too, like hard tendons or bone. I flexed, and the protrusions extended around my body—black batlike wings with accents in dark teal.

I reached for my head, feeling almost entirely numb now, shellshocked, and I could already envision what I’d find—horns, growing from where it had itched me so badly all day. And when I finally stared down at my hands, my fingernails looked like claws.

What *was* I?

What happened to me?

“Ain’t I just chuffed. I knew it was you.”

I looked up at where the three men who’d attacked me were staring in petrified fear at what I’d turned into, the bloody knife on the ground, and the one man’s pipe falling with a clatter too, as someone else entered the scene. They all turned from the horror I’d instilled in them to see something new step out from the shadows that was even more terrifying than me.

And so... so beautiful.

Red hair the color of bright smears of blood shot upward in gorgeous waves, moving like flame tips, like the man it attached to was underwater. Equally red eyes burned brightly, with black slit pupils like candle wicks inside flames. His skin was a dark almost purplish hue of ash, ears pointed like an elf,

with horns extending from above them, nestled in his hair and spiraling upward and back the same height as his flaming locks. The horns were grooved in a way that looked black at their base, but the corrugated sections were almost like scales, fading to white with reddish trim.

He wore a glittering belt, maybe made of silver with ruby gemstones, and a teal loincloth hung in front of it to his knees. A similar cloth hung behind him, longer to his ankles in dark blue, neither hiding any of his naked hips or strong thighs. On his chest were straps, like a harness, with a teal and dark blue half-vest over it more like shoulder armor than any real covering.

Behind him, wings spread, larger than mine, both batlike but somehow also feathered. The outer tendons were the same dark purplish color as his skin, but there were white spikes at their peaks, and the feathers began black, bonelike, only to fade to red and then white, becoming softer as if changing to true feathers at their tips.

Like me, he had sharp black claws and a tail, but his feet were also taloned like a bird of prey, making his height towering. His whole body had strange, alluring ridges to it, most of which I could see easily, considering how little he was wearing.

But the human parts of him, the shape of his face, the sound of his voice... were all too familiar.

“Marc...?”

He grinned, showing the longer fangs I’d drawn on him—and then his claws started *slicing*.

CHAPTER TWO

First, my lovelies, let me tell ya 'bout the night our dear Avi was reborn.

Then we can get to the good stuff.



I slashed the nearest thug's throat with my claws—once, twice—cutting it to ribbons and gushing blood down his shirt. Served him right. Served 'em all right for pulling weapons on one of my kin. Only we get to kill our own.

Though I hoped Avi didn't think me too much like family after this. We might be of similar ilk but hardly related. And he was such an adorable halfling, sporting his first set of horns and wings like a bright bubbling newborn.

As the soon to be dead man dropped, clutching his mangled neck, I caught the next one as he tried—daftly, I might add—to run past me. I squeezed until his windpipe collapsed. Then kept squeezing until blood flowed over my fingers. He convulsed when he hit the pavement, already more dead than the first. Humans were such fragile creatures.

The third bloke had gone for *freeze* rather than fight or flight, and stood staring, trembling in his boots, and having understandably pissed himself. He was the one who'd stabbed

that knife into Avi's throat, so I went for his pitifully soaked prick.

I tore it right from his body with a chunk of his jeans. Crude maybe, but effective for helping someone bleed out quicker. Not quick enough though, and since he opened his mouth to scream, I slapped my other hand over it, drenched in the blood of his mates, and tore his jaw off too, causing that scream to become a squeak in the back of his exposed throat. He slumped to his knees and fell forward, probably dying from shock on the spot. He convulsed a bit too.

I dropped the denim-wrapped prick onto his back and summoned a little hellfire to burn away the rank piss from my skin with a sizzle. It burned the blood too, but I had plenty on my other hand, and I looked right at sweet, stunned Avi—still on his knees, shirt torn open and head free of his cap—as I licked the blood from my claws.

It wouldn't be the last time he'd see such carnage, and he'd learn to enjoy spilling blood in time.

There was blood on him—his own—smeared down his neck and chest from where the wound had closed when his true form awoke. I wanted to lap that blood up too because this form was gorgeous. He'd been adorable as a human, mind ya, the sort of small and delicate thing I would have loved to ruin. As a demonling, I could already see how impressive he'd be once he grew.

There was an ombre effect from black on the edges of his wings to teal in the center of the membranes, with the same ombre spirals up his horns, which sprouted more outward than mine and curved forward. He didn't know how lovely they looked, nor did he know how his pale blond hair had changed, not flattened from his cap but swept back with an almost glow to it from how white it had become.

His eyes glowed even more, a brighter teal than before, with slit pupils like any demon, but his ears and fangs and claws were only slightly pointed. They'd become more so over time. All of him would become sharper once his true powers manifested. And I'd be right beside him.

I licked more of the blood from my fingers, and Avi shivered. He thought he should be repulsed, but he wasn't. Not by me or what I'd done. He liked it. His human side told him he shouldn't, but I could tell he did.

"Hello, Avriel. That's yer full name, innit? Angelic. Guess I'm a little early for our date, yeah? Or right on time?"

His breathing had gone heavy, and he didn't answer.

"You are beautiful." I stepped around the downed body of the prick- and jaw-less bloke with a crunch of my taloned feet. "Apologies for taking the pleasure of yer first kill from ya, but it was far too unforgivable what they did to that pretty throat."

"Y-you're..." Avi's eyes slowly raised from the bloody mess I'd made of his attackers. "Really Marc?"

"Marchosias, if we're being proper. But I'm usually not. A true pleasure to meet ya, Avi."

His mouth moved with several silent syllables before he asked, "Wh-what did you do to me?"

Nothing yet. I did so hope to do very much to that body eventually. "Not me, Avi. Ya woke up, is all, on this the day of Samhain." I grinned and took a step closer. "Happy birth—"

He leapt to his feet with a whoosh of his wings lifting him off the ground. When he dropped back down, he teetered from the surprise of having been airborne and started backpedaling.

"I mean ya no harm." I raised my hands to reassure him. "I wish to serve, to help ya ascend to yer true power and purpose." I lowered myself to my knees and dropped forward in a deep bow. "My future king."

"K-king?"

I glanced up but remained on my knees. He liked me like this. Not just the demony bits and scanty clothes, but me being submissive, prostrate before him.

A king in the making indeed.

"You are destined to become the first king of Hell." I watched his bright teal eyes widen. "The princes have been

fightin' for ages, but there's never been a king. It's been said one of the princes, one of the arch demons, though no one knows which, and all have tried to claim it was them, managed to summon enough power about twenty-two years ago or so to come here in the flesh and spawned the greatest of all cambions. You."

It was a lot to throw at a bloke who'd only been legally old enough to drink for the past five minutes.

"Avi—" I rose to my feet.

"Stop." He lurched backward.

I held up my hands again, progressing slower. "It's all right. You have a destiny—"

"Stop!" His next lurch made him hit the dumpster with a clang and his arms shot forward, launching at me what I could only describe as teal fire, with the width of a cannonball and devastating force of a laser beam.

It burned as it tore through my side, searing through me until it reached bone. I grunted and fell to one knee as it dissipated, holding where I could feel a hot rush of blood. If that shot had been any more centered, I'd be dead.

Magnificent.

"No..." Avi shook his head, and then shook his hands, as if trying to will them to turn human. "*No!*" Then they did, and all of him sagged as a wave went through him, shifting his demonic features back to petite young blond with half a shirt.

"Avi—"

"Stay away from me!" he shouted, already sprinting, racing to the post near the back door to retrieve his locked-up bike.

As I breathed through the pain in my side, trying to heal, but feeling how sluggish it was given the power that wounded me, I caught only the brief glimpse of Avi unwittingly tearing the chain from his bike like tissue paper and taking off with mad peddling, bloody, and possibly a bit unhinged after the whole ordeal, in the direction of his home.

I stole a glance at my wound. That was bone all right, with several ribs visible, and my flesh was stitching back over it far too slowly. I'd have to wait until it was covered in some tissue before I cauterized it. While I did, I was close enough to the final brute to burn him with a touch of hellfire until he was nothing but an ash scorch on the pavement.

Once my wound had muscle and a little skin forming, I scorched myself, and held back a hiss from how it stung. I was no warrior of Hell, but I'd had my fair share of wounds from rough masters. None had ever come that close to killing me or causing me so much pain, especially without trying to.

As I caught my breath, I reached beneath my front cloth covering and gave my alerted cock a stroke. Later, much as I was already far too turned on by the power Avi wielded, and the danger of serving him. I would serve him. I would ride his coattails and ascend from what my kin called *pathetic imp* to greater power than any of my masters.

If only Avi would stop running.

My side ached when I stood, but I couldn't tarry, nor very well leave the rest of this mess untidied. I burned the other bodies and any signs of blood with more hellfire, erasing all evidence of what had happened. I also retrieved Avi's mobile and discarded beanie. He seemed attached to the silly cap, and it had some charm to it.

Then I donned my human guise to lock up the shop. Lucky for this sleepy college town, no one bothered me, or I might have had to dispose of more bodies.

When I went to retrieve Avi's pack from behind the counter, which I imagined still had that uneaten cupcake inside, I noticed his drawing pad left out—on a very obvious depiction of me. Not the one from before. This was new, even more like me than whatever unknown premonition he'd had of my coming, with my fangs and correct horns and all. I was almost touched. I did so want him to feel carnal longing for me, but it seemed his human side might feel affection. How quaint.

Avi had left the keys, so locking up was simple enough. There were cameras, but they wouldn't have caught anything. Avi's demonic energy would have made them all wibbly, and there wasn't one pointed toward where he'd been attacked and transformed—and where I'd laid waste to those fools.

That was also where I'd come through the day before. I could still smell the sulfur. Or maybe that was from Avi's awakening. This would not be where the first avatar of the arch demons came through. Different weaknesses in the veil between Hell and Earth would form, all over town, until it created a nexus in the center for a larger tear. There was no way to know where, but Avi would be able to sniff 'em out.

Meanwhile, sniffing him out was simple. I already knew where he lived, and he'd indeed gone home. It was a tiny place, barely three blocks back up the hill and down a side street near a park. Cement steps led to the front door, and the storm door hadn't latched right, probably from being flung open with too much force and bouncing closed a few times. Avi had even dropped his bike willy-nilly in the driveway.

I righted it against the side of the house and caught sight of the light in the bathroom. Never understood why humans put windows in bathrooms. Peek-a-boo with the neighbors? But with the curtains open, I could see Avi clearly, staring at his reflection.

He touched his face, where the horns had been in his hair, where the stab wound had been through his throat, and was still smeared with only half-dried blood. He was breathing heavy, probably from his swift ride and continued panic, but when he gripped either side of the small sink and stared harder into the mirror, I knew he was trying to cause what happened next on purpose.

White swept through his hair, and his horns, wings, and other aspects returned in a blink.

Avi flailed backward, hitting the toilet, and I ducked down to ensure he didn't see me. Not yet. When I peeked again, he was shaking his hands like before to return human, and then

spun around, barely getting the toilet seat up before he vomited.

He was going to require *a lot* of convincing to embrace his destiny.

Probably on my knees. That was where I did my best convincing.

When he finished expelling the meager contents of his stomach, he started to undress. I watched, enjoying the reveal of bare skin, even if his work shirt had already been little more than rags. He was a wee thing, petite, but not un-sculpted. His demon form didn't have any ridges yet, still mostly soft flesh, but again, that would change in time. I imagined using my claws on this human body, drawing out little rivulets of blood, and using it like paint on a canvas until he writhed—tracing around every muscle, each nipple, down his hips, and offering a teasing pinprick slice up the length his cock. My first taste of human, or close enough to one.

Avi climbed into the shower, and I squeezed more of the pressure from between my legs.

Soon.

He'd locked the front door behind him, so he wasn't being completely irrational, but I had his keys. The house opened into a living room and dining area. It looked larger within, nicely remodeled for an early 1900s build. His father had probably done most of it, including newer floors and carpeting, and even an updated wood-burning stove. The nearest bedroom smelled like Avi. Farther in was a hallway where I could see the bathroom light. His father's bedroom must be back there. I could see the kitchen from the entrance too, through an open doorway past the dining table.

On the table was a bundle of balloons tied to a cheap vase of fiery-orange mums. I set Avi's backpack near them and found a card leaning against the vase. Avi clearly hadn't bothered to look at this yet, but finding the card unsealed, I read:

*Happy birthday, kiddo! Your
surprise is in the fridge.*

*Hopefully, someday soon, we can
have one or two of these on tap
together.*

Sweet papa. Definitely Avi's human half. Not to discount one of the arch demon's abilities to pretend to still be in Hell while actually raising their cambion on Earth, but I doubted it.

I set the card back leaning against the vase and went to the fridge to peek inside. There was a six-pack with a bow on top alongside a small cake. Cute. To my right was a pantry door, but tucked back was an open doorway into an office. At the room's far end was exterior access from a short set of steps. I walked down them to peer through the glass in the door. A fairly large backyard. With my illusions, just to be safe, we could use that space for training. Avi would need it.

A gasp sounded from behind me.

"Avi?"

Shuffling, hurried and haphazard, sounded closer, entering the kitchen.

I went back up the steps. "Avi, you have nothing to fear from me." I couldn't see him, but I could hear him fumbling around, looking for something. "I'm here to help. I can explain anything ya want to know."

The noises stopped, stilled, like he'd frozen in place.

"Avi?" I peered around the doorway into the kitchen.

And bless Avi's newly blackened heart—because he stabbed me right in mine.



THE KNIFE BROKE, crumpled, like a movie prop in a perfect accordion fold with a ting of vibrations through my hand.

I dropped it. There was a tiny hole left in Marc's T-shirt, but no blood, no wound. At least there was a shirt, with Marc human again. But he wasn't human. He wasn't even Marc.

He was Marchosias.

A demon.

"Rude," Marc said, sticking a finger through the hole, but when he retracted it, the hole closed like magic. "Just a construct though."

I hurried away from him but tripped on something I must have knocked to the floor while looking for the knife and nearly flew backward. I didn't because Marc heaved forward and caught me around the waist, just like he'd saved me earlier from being crushed by my backpack.

His hands were so... warm, and I felt that tingle of goosebumps spread over my skin like when I first felt his breath on my neck. It was on my chest now, my bare chest, because I hadn't made it to my room before I spotted my backpack, and I wasn't wearing anything but a towel.

"See? I'm here to help. To serve," he said like he had in the alley.

At least his accent was real, but none of the rest had been.

I pushed his hands from my waist, and Marc backed off, holding them up in that defensive manner like he meant no harm. Even though he'd killed three people in front of me and *licked the blood*.

Which should not have turned me on as much as it did.

My towel started to untuck, and I clutched both corners to keep it from slipping off. Marc eyed me with the same interested perusal as when I'd thought he was just a transfer student who might actually like me.

"Cleaned up the bodies for ya," he said, hands still raised. "Locked up the shop. Even brought back yer pack, drawing pad, cap, and mobile included, no worries there, and righted yer bike outside. I'm a friend."

"Y-you're a..."

"Demon?" Marc grinned, and even without his fangs lengthened, that's how I saw them now, sharp like a shark's. "Oh, love. So are you."

He kept saying that, but it couldn't be true. It couldn't be.

"Need another cuppa?" He lowered his hands, but then snapped the fingers of one, and a small flame hovered over his thumb. "I can get the kettle boilin'."

I stared. I didn't know what to believe. Was I dead? Had I died from that knife through my throat, and this was all in my head as the last of my neurons fired?

Marc frowned and blew out the flame. "Poor taste, eh? I can though, if ya'd like. Unless ya'd prefer one of the bevvies from the fridge?" He crossed to it, slowly, easing around me with plenty of room, and opened the door.

My present from Dad was a cake and a mixed six-pack from a local brewery with a note that read:

Save one for me!

Marc snapped off two from the hard plastic ring. "Whadda ya say? I can explain everything."

My empty stomach from throwing up probably would have done better with a slice of cake or some saltines, but I needed answers, and sharing a drink with a demon wasn't the worst thing that had happened today. After securing the towel, I held out a hand, and Marc tossed me one of the beers.

He tried to sit next to me, but I moved to the opposite side as him, so the dining table was between us. I popped the top on my beer and downed half of it in a gulp. Marc drank some of his too and shifted to lean over the table. He hissed and snapped upright, holding his side. I couldn't see any blood leaking through his apparent construct of a shirt, but that was where I'd fired that weird blast of energy at him.

"I... hurt you," I said.

"Ya did." Marc shifted again, choosing to not lean forward this time. "Just not with the knife."

The knife—which was crumpled and still on the kitchen floor, along with the dish towel I'd tripped over.

"D'ya know how to hurt me again?" Marc asked, and it was probably stupid that I shook my head, but I had no idea how I'd hurt him the first time. "I can teach ya, prepare ya for what's coming."

"What's... coming?"

Marc took another drink from his beer before answering, so I did too. "The princes of Hell, the arch demons? There'll be sendin'... ambassadors, if ya will."

"To recruit me?"

"To kill ya. And to steal yer power before ya come into it fully and take over Hell and the whole of the earth in the name of yer... whichever of yer parents is the arch demon who spawned ya. My bet's on Mum."

I was dead. I had to be. The beer wasn't even making my head feel fuzzy.

"Yer their trump card, Avi. Whoever they are, they beat the others to the punch. Yer poised to start the apocalypse. And as the saying goes, better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven, amirite?"

The beer was definitely threatening to come back up. "Oh my God..."

"Not exactly." Marc grinned. "But this is a good thing. An opportunity to be greater and more powerful than ya could

ever imagine. I can help ya survive what's coming. I can help ya thrive. And all I ask is a seat at yer right hand."

I laughed. It seemed like the appropriate response to the most *fucked* of all situations. Here I'd been worrying Marc might want my Ethics notes or one of my drawings more than me. He did want something, but it was a front row seat to the end of the world, and I was supposed to be driving. "I'm not starting the apocalypse. I'm not taking over anything."

"Ya will though, even if ya don't believe it yet. Yer basically the antichrist. I'm sure ya've seen about a dozen and half billion movies about it."

"I am not a demon! I can't be. My mom—" I cut off before I could say it, but then I had to. "My mom... died giving birth to me."

Marc sucked his teeth. "Hopefully that means she's the liar then and not yer pops and he offed her after boffing her." He chuckled—*chuckled*, while my mind was whirring, and I felt like I was going to throw up three times over now. "Oops. Poor taste again. Sorry, bruv. But sugar-coating it ain't gonna change nothing. You're the son of an arch demon poised to remake the world, and I'm the guardian not-an-angel here to protect ya until ya do. To serve ya... however ya want."

He got up from the table, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to fight or flee. I ended up doing neither, just sat there while he turned my chair outward from the table as if, even with me in it, it weighed about the same as one of those beer cans.

I'd parted my legs while they were hidden under the table. The towel was tightly tucked, but it had opened a little, revealing high up my thighs. Marc lowered himself to the floor between my knees, hissing again and touching his side, but it didn't deter him. He'd kneeled in the alley too. Bowed. To *me*. I still thought he was beautiful. I'd thought his demon form was beautiful too, so much like my drawing, *too much* like my drawing.

I had to be dreaming. Imagining this. Dead.

“*However* ya want,” he said again and gripped my knees, pushing the towel higher up my lap as he smoothed his palms along my thighs, his thumbs grazing right between them. Even in the shower, washing off blood, I hadn’t been able to get my dick to temper down. It had been at least half hard since I saw him slaughter those men in the alley.

What was wrong with me?

“Wasn’t a performance before.” Marc circled his thumbs higher and higher up between my legs. “Well, it was a little, to get on yer good side, learn a bit about ya, find out if the way my senses tingled around ya were for more than just that pretty face and endearing energy.” His hands disappeared beneath the last of the towel covering my cock. He grabbed hold of it, making my breath catch. “Yer something special either way, and I want to be part of it.”

He stroked my cock and fondled my sac with a smooth slide of his long middle finger teasing beneath my balls to my taint.

“I can teach ya so much, Avi, everything ya need to know ’bout our people, ’bout Hell, ’bout how ya can remake it and this world in yer image with me beside ya.” He lifted the towel to expose me, didn’t even bother untucking it, and sniffed me like he’d sniffed the side of my head after kissing my cheek. Whatever pheromones he encountered made his eyes flutter, his brown but reddish eyes that were flame red, *blood* red when he took his true form.

My cock throbbed in his hold as he continued to stroke me, to fondle me, and started rubbing my taint and across my hole with little swipes. I hadn’t meant to shift down in my seat to make it easier for him to reach, but his touch made all my muscles liquify. No one had ever touched me before. Just me. Just my hands. I didn’t know how I hadn’t come already with a spurt across his face.

Then I pictured it, ribbons of come streaking his handsome visage, and him licking it with a lap of his tongue, and then bending between my legs to lick the rest from my—

“Ah-hhh...!” I did come, though not as impressively for it to hit his lips or cheek. He chuckled and stroked me through the aftermath. The way I’d imagined coming before I did had seemed so real, like an image planted in my mind. Had he done that?

Marc hissed again, just slightly, when he bent to lick the come from my cock like I’d started to imagine. With him closer, I pushed his shirt up. Even if just an illusion, the fabric felt real. Lifted from his side, I could see bubbled scar tissue like from a bad burn, but as I stared at it, the scars were growing fainter, healing.

He caught my gaze, drawing it from the wound, and smirked as he brought his hand to his mouth and licked the last of my come from his fingers just as lewdly pleased with himself as when he’d licked away blood.

I wanted it to be both, a mix of blood and come, and to shove my cock down his throat.

Where had that come from?

What was happening to me?

“Whatever plans yer arch demon parent might have, Avi, yer the one with the power.” Marc was still fondling me, like he aimed to return me to full mast, and my cock seemed entirely okay with that idea. “Ya’ll never have to feel small or ignored again. Never doubt yer path or what ya can make yers. Never have to feel remorse or pity.”

No remorse or... pity?

“Ya can lay waste to anyone who crosses ya. Make them pay. Make them suffer.”

I didn’t want that.

I didn’t want any of that, no matter what my traitorous cock or twisted desires might say.

“You will be the one in control, Avi, and ya can have and do whatever ya want.” Marc’s hand was starting to form claws, the skin changing purplish, as he swept the pad of his thumb over my newest bubble of precome. He leaned down

again as if to swallow my cock, and half of me, maybe more than half, really wanted to let him.

I grabbed one of his shoulders to halt him, pried his demonic hand from the base of my cock, and stared into his eyes that were glowing red with the pupils gone slit. “You’ll do... whatever I ask? Anything I ask?”

His fangs grew, his expression wild, and so fucking *hot*, that I almost doubted my resolve. “Absolutely.”

“Then get the hell out of my house.”

CHAPTER THREE

It's not like I could have slept after Marc left, but I crawled into bed anyway—after hiding the crumpled knife in the trash and putting on underwear.

And shoving my torn and bloodied clothing into a plastic bag that I hid in the trash too.

And locking the door.

Not that Marc no longer having my keys would keep out a demon. My order might. At least for a while. He'd argued, tried to convince me to let him stay, but eventually, he'd agreed to leave me alone. For now.

I kept figuring, if this wasn't real, I'd eventually wake up, or die officially and move on to whatever came next if that stab wound through my throat really killed me. But time just kept ticking away, until a little after two a.m. when I heard my dad come home.

My room was right by the entrance, and though I usually shut my door so Dad getting back from a night shift wouldn't wake me up, tonight I had to keep it open and keep my eyes on the entryway. The jiggle of the lock startled me at first, but I was relieved when I saw it was him.

"You up?" he whispered when he noticed my door.

"Yeah."

"Don't tell me you just stumbled to bed a bit ago." He chuckled, talking a little louder. He was carrying something besides his work bag that I couldn't quite make out in the dark. He had to set it on the floor to lock the front door behind him.

My dad, Nathan Dermot, was about my height, late 40s, with the same shade of dirty-blond hair but greener eyes. He had a beard, which over the years had grown more reddish, and now also sported a few white hairs. If I almost never went anywhere without my beanie, then Dad was the same with his ballcaps.

He leaned his work bag against the wall beside whatever that other thing was and peered into my room. “Well? Have a good day, Champ?”

Good wasn’t exactly how I’d describe it.

Met a cute guy.

Had an incredible first date.

Died.

Grew horns.

Had my first assisted orgasm.

“It was fine. Guess I’m a little wired still and couldn’t sleep, but I only had a couple of those beers,” I lied to explain why two cans were missing, when I’d only drank one. “Thanks though. It was really good.” I didn’t actually remember how the beer tasted, but I knew it must have been. The local brewery was always raved about.

“Have any cake? Get any good presents?”

“Most people are waiting until the weekend to give me something, since I have to work every night.” That wasn’t a lie, even if “people” was just Eryn. Whatever she got me would be from her and Fry, and I wouldn’t get it until Saturday. “I didn’t want to dig into the cake yet until I could have some with you.”

“That might not be until the weekend too, kiddo. We could have some right now.” Dad nodded over his shoulder.

I doubted I could keep it down. “I’m okay. I’m really tired.”

“You sure? I mean, you sure you’re okay?” He came in and sat on the edge of my bed. He looked so normal. Human.

But was he? I suddenly had to honestly contemplate whether my dad was a demon. He couldn't be, but then... was Mom?

“Avriel?” Dad pressed with a pinch to his brow and reached to smooth back my hair. He was the only one who ever used my full name.

Other than when Marc called me by it.

Half-truths felt easier to get out right now, so I said, “I was just thinking about Mom.”

Dad frowned. He knew I didn't like my birthday, and he knew why. I had a meltdown at my tenth, the year it really sunk in that the whole reason I didn't have a mom was because of me. I was the reason. I was to blame.

Of course, he'd told me it wasn't like that. That no one was to blame. It was just something that happened. But at ten, anything without answers felt like lies.

“I wish she was here,” Dad said, petting my hair again, “to see you all grown up. I know she'd be proud. Really proud. You're smart, talented, driven. And making up for all the things I couldn't give you all on your own. That's pretty amazing. Oh!” He seemed to remember something and looked back through my door at the object he'd left behind. “There were flowers on the stoop. Surprised you missed them unless someone put them there after you got home. From an admirer I don't know about?”

Marc. It must have been. I could make out the shape of the bouquet now, a dozen dark roses, probably red, which would have been romantic if they didn't remind me of the blood he'd licked from his fingers.

Like he'd licked my come.

If tonight had gone the way I'd wanted, I would have been so eager to tell Dad about him—other than the hand-job part.

“Probably Eryn,” I said. “She's sweet like that.”

He left me alone to sleep. Usually, he'd wind down with a little TV before bed, but after a quick shower, I heard him go to his room, probably so he wouldn't keep me up. He wasn't a

demon. He wasn't. He was the best dad I could have asked for. But if everything that happened was real, if I hadn't died or was dreaming this, if I was really some half-demon prophecy about to be fulfilled, then Mom lied. She didn't die. She left and expected me to...

What?

End the world as we knew it?

I buried myself in my covers and tried so hard to sleep, but I never managed more than a little in and out, always waking to the realization that everything was royally *fucked*.



I FELT like a robot on autopilot when my alarm went off and I had to get up for class. I debated emailing my professors and saying I was sick, but then I'd have to stay home, and Dad would worry. He'd put the flowers from Marc in a vase beside the ones from him, and I knew for sure the roses were Marc's because the card read:

We can do great things together.

Like start the apocalypse.

I kept expecting to run into him on campus, but I made it to my first class without seeing him. I'm not sure how much I absorbed in my Corporate Finance course, constantly thinking about how I had horns and wings and other monstrous aspects hiding beneath the surface of my skin. At least changing forms didn't hurt every time or hadn't when I'd managed it in the bathroom.

I was so scared that some part, like my horns, might pop free without me wanting them to that I tugged my beanie down almost low enough to cover half my eyes. I'd found the beanie in my bag, like Marc said. With my busted phone, but at least

it still worked. And with my drawing pad, which I'd left in my room. I didn't want to see that drawing of him, but I also couldn't bring myself to tear it out or try changing the picture to something else.

I had work again tonight. Even knowing Marc had cleaned everything up—he had to have, since I didn't get any calls about blood in the alley or hear about local murders—how was I supposed to bring the trash out ever again, knowing I'd almost died back there? But because I hadn't, three men, however awful, died instead, and I might cause worse if my destiny was real.

As I started to leave the math building, I'd convinced myself to call in sick for work, since Dad wouldn't have to know about that, but my mind went blank when I turned the final corner for the doors and came face-to-face with a demon.

My first drawing, not the updated one, was plastered to the glass of one of the doors, now in poster form, with text that read: *What do devils serve to drink at Halloween parties?*

Demonade.

Urg.

It gave details for the Chi Alpha Sigma Halloween party on Saturday. My annoyance almost trumped the lump in my throat. The image wasn't exact to how Marc looked but was still too close for comfort.

“What were you thinking?!”

The lump jumped right back up, and I spun around, ready to fight, flee, or... more likely freeze again, which was what happened since it was Eryn and Fry, and Eryn's hands were on her hips in full-on scold mode. She was anime chic again, with a hooded jacket, flared skirt, and a sweatshirt with a cartoon bunny on it holding a gun.

Most people would be asked to change if they were caught wearing anything with a gun on campus, but Eryn looked so adorable, she'd probably get away with it.

“What did I—”

“You gave Brent art *again*? And *that one*?” Eryn accused, jutting out a finger at the poster behind me. “Please tell me he paid for it.”

Right. Me being a pushover was the problem, not that I’d turned into something last night that looked like that picture and let someone who looked even more like it give me a handy after he slaughtered three people.

I felt the lack of breakfast in my stomach lurch like I might throw up bile and tried to think of what to say.

“Avi...” Eryn deflated, which was usual when I turtled. “You can’t keep doing that. He should have paid double for taking something from you on your birthday.”

“At Ole’s?” Fry asked, succinct as always. He wore a black sweater and jeans, like me, but on him it looked stylish.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “You didn’t see it happen. It’s okay. I didn’t want to make a big deal over it. I had a lot of other things on my mind.”

“That’s right!” Eryn changed gears and latched onto my arm with a hop. “Fry told me you had ‘fun’ plans after work. I am dying to hear about it.”

I died living it.

“Uh... well...”

“Hello, love.”

The real demon appeared like I’d most been fearing and swept in on my other side as if arriving from nowhere. Marc kissed my cheek—*kissed my cheek*—right in front of Eryn still attached to my arm and Fry standing stunned beside us.

He smelled so good again. Spicy. Intoxicating. He looked even better, dressed more weather appropriate for mid-fifties in the Midwest compared to only a T-shirt yesterday—why hadn’t I realized how insane it was that he was only wearing a T-shirt yesterday? But the pinkish polo and dark burgundy zip-up sweater screamed *eat me*.

Which reminded me that he had.

His grin made me want to punch him as much as bite the expression off his lips.

Or lick it...

“Realized ya left this behind last night, since we never got ’round to eating it.” He handed me a clear plastic box with a cupcake inside. *My* cupcake, the one from Eryn. I’d completely forgotten about it. It should have been in my bag, but I hadn’t realized it was missing when I checked the contents this morning.

“You didn’t eat my cupcake?” Eryn chided. “It’ll be stale now!”

“I kept it safe,” Marc said, shouldering closer beside me. “I’m sure it’ll still be scrumptious. We could split it quick. Enjoy a little post-birthday cheer before next classes, eh? I’m Marc, by the way.” He extended an arm across me to offer to Eryn, who finally seemed to realize that sexy stranger eclipsed stale cupcake.

“*I love your accent!*” she squealed as she shook his hand. “I’m Eryn, Avi’s bestie. May I ask where you’re from?”

“Just London, so pretty boring really. Every Brit’s from London, ain’t they? Though I s’ppose if I’d said Norfolk or Shaftesbury, most Americans would wrinkle their brows.”

What was happening? What was I supposed to do? I felt like that trolley problem in basic ethics was happening in front of me and every option I had still meant someone was doomed—mostly me.

“Fry, say hello,” Eryn said, bouncing on her toes and equally bouncing her eyebrows with apparent glee, all while still not releasing my arm.

“I’m Fry,” Fry said and shook Marc’s hand too.

“Pleasure.”

At least Fry looked appropriately wary of this new guy being way too familiar with me in public. The two of them matched in height, and Eryn in platforms again meant we

matched too, so when Fry moved to stand behind Eryn, we made a sort of weird bridge.

I wished Fry being my protective pseudo-brother made me feel better, but all I could picture was Marc tearing both their jaws off like—

I slapped a hand over my mouth to keep the bile down.

“Now I’ve gone and made ya all shy, eh?” Marc said softly, so soft that his breath danced across my neck and—no, no, no! That was so cheating! “Sorry, love. Did ya not want them knowing about us yet?”

“No!” Eryn said before I could scream it. “He told us. You’re who he had plans with after work last night, huh?”

“That I am.” Marc slid an arm around my waist, and with Eryn still attached at my right, I felt cornered, trapped. “Wanted to be sure ya got those flowers I left ya.”

I looked to my friends helplessly, but while Fry had somewhat of a frown on his face, Eryn just mouthed *flowers?! like he’d offered me a ring or something*. “I-I...”

“I really did enjoy our time together,” Marc said when all I did was stutter. “Thought I might buy ya another cuppa to discuss doing it again.”

Not a chance in—

“He’d love to,” Eryn answered. I realized she didn’t know she was condemning me to literal Hell, but I’d never wished so hard to never have met her. “You two can split the cupcake.” She pushed me right into Marc’s broad, firm chest, and I nearly squished the cupcake box between us. “We can catch up another time.”

They were leaving. I looked back, and sure, I always looked panicked when she set me up with guys, so this was nothing new from their perspective, but *help, guys, seriously!* I tried to say with my eyes.

Fry hesitated, but Eryn just gave me a big thumbs up and dragged him away.

“Nice mates ya got there.”

I looked back at Marc, certain I was some weird place between seething and shaking with terror. As I took in his smug expression and mouth opening to say something else, I felt the fury overtake my fear, because yes, those were my mates, my *friends* that he'd insinuated himself among, and he was not welcome!

I used how my hands on the cupcake box were braced on his chest to push him into an alcove near the doors and out of eyesight or earshot from anyone else.

“Don't you *dare* ever do anything to them, do you understand?”

Marc looked less smug, but a lot more turned on, which was not helping. “Calm down. Or ya'll give me a chub right here in the maths center.” He winked. “I'm here to serve ya, remember? I wouldn't hurt yer friends.”

“How do I know you're not lying? You're a demon. What if you're just lying?”

He seemed to relax and stood a bit taller, which meant he was really tall looming over me. “Then ya wouldn't know how to stop me, now, would ya?”

I slumped, my fury dissipating back to panic.

“But I can teach ya,” Marc said, seeming earnest. He probably was, at least about wanting me to embrace my inner demon.

“I don't want to be what you are. I don't want any of this. To hurt people,” I said in what I hoped was a disgusted enough sounding hiss, “make them suffer for crossing me, remake everything in my image? I don't even know what that would look like.”

“Here I thought it was that?” Marc nodded out of the alcove, where we could still see the demonic poster on the glass of the door.

What could I say? I'd always been drawn to that sort of style, to darker depictions in art and stories. That didn't mean a person who liked that stuff wanted dark and terrible things to happen around them or even to the people they most hated.

“Ya don’t have to know it all yet, Avi. Not right away. It’ll come to ya.”

“I don’t want it to.” I whirled back to face him and hit his chest with the cupcake box “I am not—”

“*Avi.*” He grabbed my shoulders, and though I wanted to break away from his hold with a burst of my arms outward, I worried my wings might burst out too. “Yer not gonna get a choice in the matter. Those avatars of the arch demons, yeah? Still coming. Ya try and run from yer destiny, they’re just gonna kill ya. Then yer friends. Then yer pop. And anyone else ya care about, because if *you* don’t lead the apocalypse, one of the princes will.”

I had to be dreaming. Why wasn’t I dreaming...?

“And good timing really for that lesson.” Marc released me, and I really, really hated how casual he sounded, especially when he added, “Cause we don’t have much time at all.”

“Time before what?”

He grinned—because of course he did. “Figured our first guest might arrive last night after ya woke. Lucky for you, they didn’t. But judging by my very keen sense of the thinning veil between worlds...” He rubbed his hands together, closed his eyes, and then held his hands outward like communing with the powers that be. He peeked at me with only one eye opening. “Got about twenty minutes until another demon, one not nearly as sweet or delightful as me, comes looking for ya.”

CHAPTER FOUR

It helped when the truth was a better weapon than a lie, especially when convincing a burgeoning demon king to take up his mantle.

I popped the last of the cupcake into my mouth and slowly licked the frosting off my fingers, while Avi pretended not to watch. I'd offered him the other half, but he'd declined, so I'd made a good show in devouring it.

Twenty minutes was likely being generous for our imminent guest. I could feel the thrumming of the thinning veil like a heartbeat. If I was back in Hell, I'd be able to follow that sense right to the source. My specialty. From this side, it was harder, but at least that meant Avi had to play nice and let me stay close beside him while helping him follow his own budding senses.

"This way? Maybe? I'm not even sure what I'm feeling. Why can't you do this?" Avi pouted up at me, glaring at my hand that I clamped down on his shoulder now that the cupcake was gone, following his lead like a dowsing rod.

"Cause while I might have a knack for sniffing out veil tears in Hell, only someone with a deeper connection to the human plane can find one here. You. I'll be able to tell better once we're closer. Yer doing beautifully, Avi."

He looked forward down the path to try hiding that he blushed, either from our proximity or the husk I added to my voice when saying his name. That I had such an effect on him was a clear sign of serendipity.

To any passersby, we were just a couple on a leisurely stroll from the maths building past some of the western dorms. Didn't stop most of them from eyeing us. Tiny goth twink with his strapping, protective boyfriend? Why yes, please do think of us as that. Then turn your gazes elsewhere. He's mine.

Maybe some of them were focused more on me, but I could tell those whose eyes strayed to Avi, wondering what they must have missed about him all these years if the sex on legs beside him was so interested.

And I was. Oh, I was, and bristled with excitement at the danger and potential of the hunt ahead while at his side.

We'd already passed one of the two tallest dorms on campus, passed the main circle-drive entrance, and were headed to the furthest dorms, practically on the edge of campus property—when Avi paused and took the path into the woods.

It wasn't a deep wood. I'd explored it some. But it filled in nicely between where we were and some of the on-campus fraternity houses. Other frats were in houses down the main drag into town, like those Chi Alpha Sigma prats who'd used Avi's drawing for their Halloween poster—I assumed without permission.

Dangerous decision that.

The wood was decorated for Halloween still like most of the campus since the far west dorms did a haunted trail thing for the season each year. They still had more planned for the weekend, but being a weekday now and barely noon, the trails were mostly empty.

Avi slowed, like he could feel the tear but was wary of trusting his new senses. I could feel it too, far better than before. He was leading us right.

Made sense the veil tears would form mostly around campus, given Avi was the catalyst. I hadn't known what I'd find when I discovered that first breach on the Hell side, accidentally, not on mission for any master. But to find one so ripe and open, knowing it would close behind whoever dared

jump through first, I hadn't paused to consider ramifications, I'd simply taken a leap of faith.

I'd sensed Avi instantly and followed his scent to campus, learning what I could and bewitching anyone I needed to ensure my enrollment went through.

"I did like yer mates," I said as we strolled. "Seems your bestie sure liked me."

"No." Avi was quick to counter. "She likes the idea of me dating. She doesn't know you."

"Fair. That Fry fellow certainly gave me the once over. Almost thought he might have a crush on ya."

"No way."

"He doesn't, but he does care for ya. Brotherly like. Very sweet."

"I'm serious." Avi stopped and glared at me again. "If you ever—"

"Never." I raised both hands, looking as innocent as I could, which probably didn't aid me much. I was lying after all. I'd eviscerate anyone who crossed me—or Avi—including his friends if it came to it. I hoped it wouldn't, but if it did, I'd be sure to put the blame on someone else.

Avi continued forward, and I returned my hand to his shoulder with a squeeze. He sighed like he wanted to shrug me off. He didn't. My power mingling with his helped him steer, and I knew he liked it when I touched him. He'd definitely liked it last night.

At a fork in the road, Avi took the narrower option, which was more minor footpath than purposeful trail.

"I trust ya properly disposed of yer shirt from last night?" I asked. "Should only have yer own blood on it, but still not the type of thing to keep 'round if ya don't want questions."

"I... threw it away."

"Ah."

“I wrapped it in a plastic bag first! And shoved it all the way down with that knife.”

“The one ya stabbed me with?”

“You broke into my house!”

“Had the keys, didn’t I?”

He whirled on me this time with such an adorable huff, I was hard-pressed not to boop his nose.

“Here’s a trick for next time.” I raised my hands and centered myself away from any hanging leaves. The foliage was thicker here, even with some of the trees going bare in the late autumn coolness. The ones that remained were basically dry kindling.

I started with a snap and the appearance of a flame above my thumb like last night, then I summoned even more hellfire so my hand glowed and erupted in red flames like a torch. I carefully touched a brown and brittle leaf just as it was falling, and it was ashes in an instant.

“Any demon can do it,” I said to the wide-eyed Avi. “And don’t say ya aren’t one.”

“How do I... do it?”

Progress. I dismissed my own flames and said, “Think of something that makes ya... hot.”

He glared.

Less progress.

“Anger works too.” I shrugged. “Channel that fury or passion right into yer palms and watch it sizzle.” I erupted both hands with hellfire this time, lighting up the path that was shadowed from the hanging branches.

“Does it hurt?”

“I’ve always found it soothing.”

I dismissed my fire again and watched Avi raise one hand to attempt it. He failed to ignite anything for several beats. When at last I saw his cheeks flush before a nearly too strong

flame of his unique teal fire burst over his hand and up his arm without burning his sweater, I liked to think he'd conjured the image of me licking his quick release come from my fingers.

Voices and shuffling sounded from behind us, and Avi shook his hand until the flames died. Whoever belonged to those voices were headed down the main path and wouldn't see us, but Avi continued deeper down our trek, which only a few paces later opened into a small clearing with an historical marker of some sort.

Probably where a pilgrim stopped to pray. This was a Lutheran college, believe it or not, for a place called St. Ignatius. Very secular in teaching though, and I knew Avi and his proud papa didn't practice, but still. There was a chapel. Shudder the thought.

"It's... here?" Avi turned in place to take in the clearing. It was adequate, but more a sparring area than where I'd have liked our first battle to take place. Not my choice to make though.

"Certainly feels like it." I moved around him to lean against the marker. "Reckon five minutes to go? How 'bout a pint after? Never really got our second date, did we? Skipped right to dessert." I winked, expecting he'd huff and blush and deny me again, but he stared me down instead, probably trying to distract himself from what was coming.

"Why do you talk like that? With the accent?"

"'Cause I talk like that," I parroted back. "Think of Hell like a mirror dimension of this one, overlapping yers but that ya can't see. Sorta like that Upside Down from *Stranger Things*."

"That!" Avi moved toward me, pointing in accusation. "How do you know that? Or about Giger? Or anything else we talked about? You made it seem like demons can't usually cross over."

"We can't. My first time here in the flesh." I rested my hands back on top of the marker to better display myself while leaning, hip cocked. "See, my role as a not very powerful

demon, more an underling—I like to serve,” I added with another wink. “My job was to find thin spots in the veil for my masters so they could slip through for possessions. Took an aptitude test, turned out it was my strength—among other things—and there ya have it.”

Avi blinked like he didn’t believe me, but it was basically the gist.

“All of us can see into yer world fine, and sometimes cross over as spirits, but it takes a special kinda gap to come over like I did. Where I was first born and spent my early years was the upside down of London, so that wasn’t a lie to yer mate. Demons talk the way you lot talk. ‘Course I can speak every language, if yer interested.”

I switched to Hindi first, given Indians in London were closest to my human cousins.

“I’m going to swallow your cock so deeply when this is over, I’ll pass out from lack of breath and wake to you fucking my mouth while I’m still half conscious.”

“Wh-what?” Avi backed a step away from me.

I pushed from the marker to pursue, speaking in French. *“I’m going to ride you until your first ridges form as your body changes—”* I switched mid-sentence to Gaelic *“—and make you so hot, so mad for it, you break me apart.”*

“Stop.” Avi’s hands glowed with teal flames as he held them toward me. I didn’t doubt they could burn through me as cleanly as his beam had last night, and my chest heaved closer at the thought. “I know what you’re saying. Not *what*, but... enough.”

Much as I enjoyed pushing my darling demonling, I backed off. “Can’t help myself. Ya tasted so good, Avi, I want another lick.”

“Like blood?” he sneered and let his hands drop and the flames snuff out.

“Ya’ll learn to like the taste of blood when it belongs to yer enemies—and sometimes yer lovers.”

“No, I won’t.” Avi looked around again, nervous, seeking where the tear might form. His eyes settled on a spot I was certain was the right one.

“Ya know, for being part human, and clearly a *virgin*,” I said in an exaggerated whisper, “I’m impressed by yer resistance. Bit annoyed. But impressed.”

“Thanks,” he said without looking at me.

“I still think I’ll wear ya down. There are so many good things in what ya think yer afraid of, Avi.” I slipped up behind him since he was so determined to look away from me and saw him shiver from the nearness of my body heat. “Ya don’t have to fear anything if ya follow my lead, and I’ll follow yers. Like how ya led us here, right to where we needed to be in just the nick of time.”

The tear formed like an invisible hand holding a sparkler midair, igniting up and down from its center like a bright blue lightning bolt crackling into existence.

“M-Marc...?” Avi backed up into me and flailed to clutch my arm. I reveled in his inevitable dependence on me. I needed that, but I also needed him to step up and *do this* once that tear opened.

It did, with large taloned claws, far larger than mine, ripping through the center of it. Both hands gripped the edges, pulling, and *pulling* to wrench it open and give the beast on the other side enough of a gap to step through.

A cloven-hoofed foot came first, but the tear wasn’t big enough for the rest of it, so its claws kept pulling.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, *fuck*,” Avi chanted.

“Sloth, eh? Not my favorite choice.”

“S-Sloth? Like the Seven Deadly Sins?”

“That be them, representing each of the princes.” I plucked the beanie from Avi’s head and tossed it behind us onto the marker. “Ya might ruin it when yer horns grow. Which they should be doing about now, please. Ya can learn to change without wrecking yer clothes eventually. I’ll teach ya.”

I demonstrated by doing so first. My taloned feet grew without bursting apart my construct of shoes, and my human clothes morphed into my attire from Hell. I was winged, horned, and ready to play with but a flex of my claws.

Avi flinched from holding my arm, but unconsciously reached forward again as if to touch my chest, only to catch himself and pull back. He'd touch me like this soon, no doubt in my mind.

A snort like a bull and rumbling growl brought our attention back to the tear, as the last of the large satyr-like demon stepped through to our side, stood tall, and the breach in the veil closed behind it. A fitting avatar for Belphegor, Prince of Sloth.

He was blue like the tear he'd pried open and twice my size. Not only were his goat legs fringed in fur but the entirety of his body, and the naked prick between his thighs was a daunting staff of meaty flesh. His clawed hands were massive as well, chest broad and corded with a twist of muscle and bone, more bone the higher one looked, until getting to his head, which was a bull's skull with coiled ram horns. Blue flames snorted from his nostrils as he squared off facing us.

"D-d-does sloth mean slow?" Avi stammered.

"It does when they walk."

"*Imp*," the satyr rumbled like the hissing of unknown creatures in a cavern and raised one of his arms to point at me, "hand over the cambion."

How lovely to be included. "Not likely." I grinned and readied my claws on either side of me. "Care to make those demands a little closer, big boy?"

"If you wish." He launched himself so high into the air, he nearly breached the top of the trees.

This first avatar should be weakened from passing through the veil. Each would get stronger as they came and the veil thinned further, but this one should be the easiest.

Hopefully.

“Now, Avi! Blast him!” I cried as the satyr descended.

“I-I... I-I-I...”

“Change! Do it!”

“I can’t!”

Shit.

I grabbed Avi and rolled us out of the way just as the satyr slammed into the spot where we’d been, hooves and taloned hands coming down like Thor’s hammer had smashed into the earth and trembled the trees.

I yanked Avi back to his feet with a beat of my wings, as the satyr turned his skull-head toward us.

“Ya need to change, Avi. Now.”

“You said you’d help me!”

“I *can*.” I shook his shoulders. I did so enjoy his awed expression when he looked at me in this form, but we didn’t have time for shock and awe. “I can teach ya and guide ya and offer ya aid, but alone, I’m not strong enough to defeat an avatar.”

“What?!”

“That’s why I serve you!” I spun him to face the beast that was slowly rising to his full height again. “You can. Trust me.”

“Pathetic,” the satyr growled.

I really hated when they called me that. “How’d the likes of you end up first to the tear, eh? Slow and steady wins the race, tortoise boy?”

“Always,” he said and readied to leap again—with Avi still cowering.

I pushed him aside as the satyr launched upward. “You know what sport I’ve grown quite fond of? MMA actually.” I grabbed the trunk of a nearby tree and hefted it right out of the ground by its roots. “Gotta love the homoerotic grappling. But when in doubt, stick with the classics.”

I barely had enough room to swing, but as the satyr came toward me, I batted him like a baseball. My arms shook from the impact, and the tree thunked to the ground. That hadn't had nearly the effect I'd hoped for, since the satyr didn't fling backward but sort of stalled a pace in front of me and still landed with a quake. I might have broken a few or possibly all the bones in my arms. Kinda made it hard to react when he grabbed me by the throat.

“Marc!”

Thing about sloth demons was that they're notoriously resilient. Slow but practically invulnerable. Another thing was how they could sap... the strength... from anyone they touched.

Fuck.

I weakened to the point of a human child in seconds. I tried to fight it, but even if I'd used some of my own kin's ability through touch, it wouldn't have been strong enough to counter an avatar, not as I was now. He was either going to tear me in two or pluck my wings off like a butterfly.

I could tell Sloth was grinning as he debated between those options, even if his skull face hadn't changed. He grabbed the base of one of my wings.

Decision made then.

“No!”

That bright beam of teal hellfire filled my vision, and I dropped. The satyr had released me, and I spilled onto the ground. I couldn't get up. I could barely move. But the same was true of Sloth 'cause a good ol' chunk was gone from his side, and he'd crumpled to his knees.

Good boy, Avi.

If a bit late.

Instinct had served him well, since I didn't see torn clothing. The start of his Hell attire had formed too, with a high neck and shoulder armor that connected to his flesh like freshly fashioned muscle the color of his teal fire. The rest of

his skin had gone paler, and quite a bit of it was showing, to my delight, along with what I hoped was nothing more than a black thong. I couldn't see behind him to be sure, since he was facing me and a long, billowing black and teal half-skirt attached at his hips.

He looked a bit small yet with bare human feet on the ground and his claws, wings, and horns no larger than before, but it was a start, and his swept back white hair gleamed.

“Insolent whelp!” the satyr roared, getting to his hooved feet, and turning to face Avi with a stomp and paw at the ground. The wound from Avi's fire had already almost healed.

“It barely stunned him!” Avi's demonic features wavered with his uncertainty.

“It will! Do it again! Sloth demons are strong, rarely get tired, and are basically invincible, but he's no match for the real you, Avi!”

“He's zombie Superman?!” Avi trembled, but at least he didn't turn human.

“Do you believe in your strength, *boy?*” the satyr taunted. “I don't think you do.” He leapt again, and Avi had to use his wings to escape from being squished.

He remained aloft, above us over the clearing, seeming to only then realize how his clothing had changed and that he could fly.

“Blast him, Avi!”

He tried, bless him, but before he could summon enough power into his palms, the satyr leapt straight upward and started swatting at him, barely allowing him to flap out of the way.

“What do I do?!”

I tried to get up, but I slumped back down again.

Every time Avi tried to call upon his power, the satyr swatted him, putting Avi on the defensive. If he just believed in himself, he could decimate that brute, but in lieu of Avi embracing his full power, he had to switch tactics.

“Avi!” I called again. “What does sloth mean?”

“Uh... laziness?”

“Complacency! He’s not creative enough to come up with unique attacks. *You* are.”

“Silence, imp!” The satyr’s leaping chase after Avi had brought him back my way, and he stomped closer. “A weakling like you is good for nothing but fodder.” He raised one of his hooves over my face, and I still couldn’t move enough to crawl out of the way of having my skull caved in.

Another strong beam of hellfire scorched through the satyr’s side and made him roar in pain. I *was* a weakling compared to an avatar, compared to most demons, but that wouldn’t be true for long—not with Avi.

As the satyr whirled on Avi again, I heard my young king murmur, “Creative... creative.” Then he flapped his wings to take himself higher, flipped end over end to land on the satyr’s back, and gripped both of his horns while straddling his shoulders. He wrenched and wrenched as if trying to tear the beast’s head off.

“Don’t let him touch you!” I cried. “A sloth’s touch can drain energy!” Which I’d hoped he’d realized after seeing what happened to me.

Whether he had or simply listened now, he was in the perfect spot to avoid the satyr’s reach, its arms far too muscled to bend back that far. Avi kept wrenching with his hands on the horns, and I saw the skull head—part head, part helm, really—tearing from the flesh it attached to.

“You’re nothing!” The satyr swung his arms up, trying to get to Avi to no avail. “Belphegor shall rule! You are no king! You are human and frail! Pitiful!”

“Shut up!” Avi kept wrenching.

I might not have given the satyr enough credit for creativity, because next he popped one of his shoulders out of its socket to better flap his arm back, and though he couldn’t grip well, he managed to clutch Avi around the waist—his

bare waist—and I saw Avi’s body twitch and his eyes flutter as he weakened, weakened, and then... didn’t.

Avi howled through the sluggishness overtaking his body and wrenched the horns one final time, pulling them and the skull head free with so much momentum that he tumbled off his perch and couldn’t right himself quick enough to use his wings. He hit the ground, swiftly tossing the helm away from him.

Helm, because the rest of the satyr’s head was still attached.

The head beneath was more human looking as if someone had torn the skin and half the muscles from a now bloodied face. Sloth’s blue fire eyes burned, as he snapped his shoulder back into place and raised both hands to slam down on top of Avi.

Avi countered with the most brilliant and concentrated blast of his teal hellfire I’d yet seen, straight upward, searing directly through the fleshy head that no longer had its exoskeleton to protect it. Avi unleashed more and more and *more* into that singular blast until the satyr’s arms went slack. Then Avi’s did too, sagging to his sides as the fire dissipated.

The satyr, no longer having any sort of head on his shoulders, but rather a bloody burning stump, dropped to his knees and toppled to the side in a heap.

His life energy began to seep free like blue sparkling mist almost instantly.

“Don’t let it disperse.” I lurched to my feet. It was agony forcing myself to move, but I had just enough strength returned to me to manage it. “That’s yer reward, Avi. Yers for the taking.”

And mine.

Avi scrambled up quickly, moving toward the mist, but clearly not knowing how to take it in. “What do I—”

“Will it toward ya. Want it and it’ll come.” I dragged myself to join him with sluggish steps. He raised an arm, and the mist began to coil around it, upward and upward until it

seeped into his chest, filling his every pore, and making him glow with that same pulsing blue.

“*F-fuck,*” he moaned.

“Yeah. Let it fill ya, the life energy of yer first kill. The avatars will help ya grow stronger, more and more after each win.”

As I came up behind him, watching the energy spiral up around Avi’s outstretched arm to enter him, I siphoned some for myself like a remora fish eating scraps at the side of a shark. My former masters allowed practically nothing. *This* was a meal, even taking the meagerest amount. I’d only ever tasted the fleeting energy of humans or other minor demons like myself. An avatar’s power, second only to an arch demon—*fuck* was right, and I got why Avi had moaned. I nearly did too.

Without him, I never could have stood a chance facing such a behemoth, but with him, at last I could achieve my own destiny and never be what my brethren called pathetic again. Avi didn’t even notice when, by the end, I’d taken more of the life force than him.

All my drained energy came back with abundance from that power, and I really, *really* wanted to expend some of it on something carnal.

Given Avi’s speedo manifestation, he could hardly hide how much the fight and our earned prize had affected him. The tent of his cock was too inviting to resist, and I reached around his waist to palm that tempting bulge.

Avi moaned louder as the last of the satyr’s energy filled him with a final surge, causing the beast’s body to burst into a shower of blue sparks, and become nothing but char in the grass.

I was close enough behind Avi to press up against his back and feel his wings flutter. I was nearly a foot taller than him with my demon feet and his still human. His toenails were barely claws, but that would change. For now, I enjoyed the height difference and how it allowed me to bend and lick the

point of one of his ears while I squeezed his cock, encouraging the wetness I could feel leaking through the cloth.

Avi whimpered and sank against me.

“Not bad, eh? And that’s only one of many. Each after will taste even better than the first.” I started stroking through the covering, feeling him lengthen in my hand.

“I-I-I...”

“You... are incredible, my king. Clever. Powerful. And ya know, ya can will this cute little covering away with a thought.” I paused my strokes to squeeze a little harder, and he gasped. “Or... I can keep teasing ya within its confines. Would ya like that?”

Avi shuddered. He didn’t answer, but that meant he didn’t tell me to stop either.

While my palm pressed against him, urging him to fuller hardness, I teased my claws along the edges of the undergarment where his thighs met his hips. Then I slipped them inside. Scratched lightly at his heavy sac. Then harder, but still not enough to draw blood. I wanted to though, and to lap it up afterward, blood and come both, while he watched me with hooded eyes.

I put that image into his mind, letting him see it as clearly as if I was sucking his cock while carving designs into his skin.

Avi squirmed, rolling his hips against my hand. His wings fluttered again, trembling from the building heat between us.

I pressed my own bobbing cock, which had escaped the fabric that hung over it, against his crease, or where I could feel it through the half-skirt hanging over his backside. The fabric was thin enough, like my own, that he had to feel my wetness, just as his was coating my palm.

I started rolling my hips, rutting against him like he rutted into my hand. His continued whimpers were a marvelous melody, and I felt his tail coil back around my waist. I wondered if he even knew he did it. I coiled mine forward to loop with his.

“M-Marc...”

“Avriel...” I breathed on his neck and licked the tip of his ear again.

Lifting one side of the undergarment, I slid my hand in fully and gripped his naked shaft.

Laughter sounded down the path.

I growled. Those unsuspecting humans didn't know what was in store for them for interrupting—

Avi lurched out of my hold, spun around, and shook his hands, still thinking it necessary to do so to change back. His humanity and previous clothing returned, though his hard-on was still apparent through his jeans, and his once again blond hair had kept its swept back shape. Then he looked at me with pleading eyes for me to change back too.

“*Marc*,” he ordered when I hesitated.

A commanding Avi didn't lessen my arousal, but I obeyed.

By the time we were joined by a group of young women, two laughing, and one looking spooked, Avi and I were no more demonic than any of them.

“See!” One of them giggled. “We heard noises, weird noises, but figured it was someone practicing for the last haunted trail this weekend.”

“Or something,” the other laughing one snorted and gave us a suggestive look.

We were panting and probably flush, after making “weird noises” alone in the woods.

“Caught us,” I said and threw my arm over Avi's shoulders, who flinched but didn't dislodge me.

The spooked girl looked convinced enough to be dragged away by her friends.

“Have fun!” one of them called as they scurried off.

I squeezed Avi's shoulder and leaned down to speak softly into his ear, feeling him shiver in my hold. “Feel like that pint

now, love?"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Toadstool Bar and Grill—loose on the grill option—served food as well as drinks, though the sort of fried fare that provided the basest of calories with no real nutrition. Not that it mattered to me. Food was purely for pleasure for demonkind, something Avi’s body might not have adjusted to yet, but he’d still barely touched his burger.

“Come now, love. Gotta keep yer strength up. Ya earned it.” I pushed his plate closer to him, while pilfering a few fries for myself. Loved those fat potato wedge types. Didn’t have much to compare against for human food, but I knew grease meant flavor, and these bad boys were sopping with it and still had a good crunch.

I imagined this was what being a tad trolled felt like, buzzed, and thrumming, and craving every sort of excess I could nab to add to the feeling. Pure, top-tier, bloody bonkers avatar life force had flooded my being and I was crackling.

Pity Avi wasn’t letting himself enjoy it.

We were tucked far enough into a dark corner booth to not be visible to pretty much anyone, save the most immediate table in line of sight across the bar. Vale had a few local pubs with small town charm to ‘em, and Avi had suggested the biggest dive of the bunch.

He’d ordered his burger well done but stared at the meat showing from the single bite he’d taken as if it was mooing.

“I just keep... seeing that face.”

Meaning the one he'd obliterated after tearing a demon's helm off like peeling away skin. Maybe a burger hadn't been my best suggestion after he'd roasted the fleshy bits under a steer's skull. "Ya saved my life. Satyr boy would have torn me to pieces. Almost did." I nudged his knee under the table and grinned when he glanced at me.

A smile twitched at Avi's mouth too. "You did save my life first. Well... no." He scowled and leaned a bit away from me. "You avenged me after the fact. Those robbers had already stabbed me when you stepped in. Were you... did you wait to intervene to be sure I was who you thought?"

I'd really hoped he never noticed that part. "I was ninety-five percent certain," I said and popped the last stolen wedge into my mouth.

Avi groaned, but as much as he might tilt away from me, he didn't scoot out of range of our knees knocking.

I swiped another wedge. "Demons heal quickly. Faster the more powerful ya are. I wasn't worried. Couldn't risk interfering till ya woke, and a wound like that won't ever touch ya again. Only another demon can hurt ya now. Like you hurt me. And I'm healing too."

After popping the last of that wedge into my mouth, I grabbed Avi's hand out of his lap. He'd been clutching the edge of his sweater like a lifeline, probably to keep his hands from straying, though I could tell they wanted to. I slid his fingers up beneath my shirt to where the scar tissue from last night was almost entirely smooth now. What I didn't mention was that it was even more healed than it might have been after the meal of that avatar.

Avi's fingers were tense, resistant, but when I pressed them to my scarred side, he splayed them over the remaining bubbling of healed flesh. I debated changing forms beneath my shirt, enough for him to feel my ridges. Bit like bone but still tender, still sensitive to caresses as well as cuts or tears, and very much like that new drawing of his. It was... nice, seeing oneself through another's eyes.

Avi started sliding his hand further up beneath my shirt, enough to flash some of my bare skin to that table in view of us. No one had been there when we sat, but a couple of blokes were there now. One had his back to us, but the other's gaze was glued to us so intensely, I could feel the heat from his stare.

Let him watch.

Avi's thumb brushed my nipple, and I knocked our knees again with a gasp. He gasped back, and his eyes darted to mine. I put just a tiny flash into his thoughts of my clawed hand inside his underwear, wrapping around his plump cock like in the wood, and he leaned closer like he might steal a kiss.

He snapped back and yanked his hand out of my shirt.

Damn.

"Do you even... like me?"

Oh darling. "Poised for world domination and ya care more about which middle school checkbox I'd mark off?"

Avi pouted, and oh, how I wanted to nibble those lips until they bled.

"Got a pretty low opinion of yerself, seems like. Shame. 'Cause whatever ya might think there, Avi, it's not what I see."

"Yeah, well, you want an evil demon king who revels in bloodshed."

"Yer missing my point." I turned to face him fully and stretched my arm across the back of the booth. "I want someone with vision. Someone beautiful and powerful and who holds me captive. Yer all those things and more."

"That's not me." Avi's face scrunched—just as adorable as the pout. "That's someone like... Eryn."

"Not to deny yer mate's attractiveness and all, but it's not her looks. It's one thing, the most important thing, which often translates to a boost in attractiveness, sure, but it's more than that." I leaned closer and whispered near his ear. "Confidence. As the son of an arch demon, you should have plenty. But ya

think no one has reason to look at ya, so they don't. Well, someone is." I slid my eyes aside, still feeling the heat from spying eyes.

"What?" Avi turned his face inward, bringing our lips a breath apart.

"Ya can keep getting handsy if ya like. Seems we have a captive audience who is really enjoying the show."

Avi hunched as he looked out from our corner hideaway, grumbling when he found our spectator and trying to hide his face behind my shoulder. "Oh God, it's Brent."

"Brent? Frat boy I saw chatting ya up before ya nearly face-planted in the hall yesterday?" I finally looked, but it seemed Brent had turned his head too at the meeting of his and Avi's eyes. He was also hiding, practically ducking out of sight behind the bloke across from him.

I'd only caught a glimpse of Brent before, back on campus and leaving Avi's shop. Good looking fella, though he had a ball cap pulled down tight today. Did humans actually think a hat hid them? At least I'd convinced Avi to stow his beanie instead of smushing down his hair again. When it returned from demony white to blond, it retained that smoothed back shape and framed his handsome face more than he gave himself credit.

"He wasn't chatting me up—"

"Just asking for yer drawing, yeah? Which ya gave him."

"Not on purpose!" Avi shifted positions, still trying to somehow hide behind me, even with us side by side, but I wasn't about to complain when it pressed him closer against me. "He took it when he and his friends stopped by the shop last night. I didn't technically tell him no. It's not a big deal anyway. I like the other one be—" He snapped his mouth shut before finishing that thought.

"Like the other one *better*? Me too. Captured my likeness perfectly. Very flattering."

I expected him to deny it, but he asked. "How did I do that?"

“Talent?”

“I’m serious. How did I know what you’d look like before I saw you?”

“Don’t know,” I admitted. “You are the future king of Hell. Makes sense ya have some premonition in ya.” It might have something to do with which of the princes was his mum too. I had a guess at who it might be, but I preferred having his focus right where it was. “All demons fall under a tribe of the Seven and have powers accordingly. One guess which is mine.”

Avi blinked at me for half a second before he groaned again.

“Aww, doncha wanna know what us *lust* demons can do?” I breathed into his ear and slithered out my forked tongue to tickle its interior.

“N-not really.”

“Gotta work on those liar skills, mate. Yer terrible at it.”

Avi pushed me, and his increased strength, which he didn’t yet appreciate, moved me several inches with one shove.

I ate another potato wedge.

“What about... Satan? You know, Lucifer?”

“Two different princes. Wrath and Pride, respectively. There’s no king of Hell, remember? Not yet.”

Avi grabbed a wedge to nibble on too. “But where do demons come from? It’s not like in the religious stories?”

“Please, do ya know how many of those there are? It’s a miracle any of them got even close to right. Although, ya know how in Greek mythology, Hades is both God of the Underworld and the Underworld itself?”

“Yeah...”

I tilted my head at him.

“The real Devil *is* Hell?”

“In a manner of speaking. The first of us were birthed from its providence, just a natural part of the universe really. Some

were born later from the many, *many* orgies within our tribes. Others were born from human thoughts and perversions manifesting across the veil. Like me.”

“You... were born from thoughts and perversions? Which ones?”

I was so glad he asked. “The desire to fornicate in a church? To lick the blood from a well-earned wound, preferably with a mix of come after rutting on a battlefield? To deflower a virgin until they’re a wanton slut for cock, just begging for—”

“Got it.” Avi pressed his fingers to my lips.

I licked them, making sure he saw the fork this time as I slithered it between his fingers. He recoiled, but I saw the flush that kept creeping up his neck. “Brent’s still watching, by the way.”

“I know.” Avi was trying to keep his head ducked, but when he next glanced at Brent, he noticed what I had. “Is he hiding too? Why?”

“Maybe he has a crush on ya.”

“About as possible as Fry having a crush on me.” He sat up straighter. “I don’t know who that is with him. Looks older. And familiar...”

“Sugar daddy?”

Avi pouted at me again. “Why did I even agree to come here with you?”

“Because I am a delight.”

“You’re a menace.”

“That too.”

He laughed, unable to keep the smile from his face.

I crowded closer and said as soft and sincere as I could—which took some effort, “I do like ya, Avi. I like all the things we talked about too.”

“You just never really went to the Giger Museum?”

“Sure, I did. From the Hell side. Still got to see everything. Like that primed and presenting alien on all fours, begging for a fiend like me to take up the offer.” I slid my hand onto Avi’s thigh. He didn’t push me away. For all his resistance, I had him, and I needed to keep having him to get what I wanted. “Wanna give ol’ Brenty-boy a real show?”

“Huh?” Avi’s eyes darted outward, trying to catch Brent watching, which I knew he was. “What do you mean?”

The dark-patterned tablecloth would hide me well enough should the waitress saunter back to us, but Brent would definitely know what I was doing. “Imagine how differently he’ll think of ya if he sees ya getting yer pecker wetted by a bloke like me.”

“M-Marc—”

“No one else is watching. No one else will know. But he will.” I caught Brent’s eyes with a sharp flick, putting just enough bewitching power into my look to keep him from darting his eyes away.

Then I waved and ducked under the table.



MARC WENT UNDER THE TABLE.

Why was he...?

Oh God.

Oh *fuck*.

My jeans were open with his hand inside my underwear before I could stop my mouth from dropping open, and my eyes snapped to Brent’s—who was watching. His eyes bulged as they flicked from me to below the table.

To me.

To the table.

I knew he couldn't actually see what Marc was doing, but he knew. He *knew*, and when his gaze lifted back to mine, he shifted in his chair.

It was turning him on to know Marc was under there and to only guess at what he was doing to me. That didn't mean Brent had a thing for me, but to have that sort of power over him, to know I was making him squirm...

I liked it.

Just like I'd liked that demon's energy filling me and knew I wanted more.

I lifted my hips to let Marc pull my jeans and underwear to my knees, and he chuckled.

"Shut up," I grumbled.

"At yer service, my king, and I know just how ya can silence me." He swallowed me down, and my eyes rolled back. Of course he was a lust demon, and it felt incredible to feel all that wet suction around me, as he took me deep enough for his nose to hit my stomach.

I refocused on Brent, who was breathing harder while watching my reactions. The man with him excused himself for the bathroom, and Brent barely acknowledged him. It was so hot, knowing he knew. My face burned with what should have been embarrassment, but it was all heat, all arousal, and I let Brent see in my expression how good Marc was making me feel.

He was, and so much more intensely than his hands on me or licking the come from my shaft. He was between my legs in a public bar and sucking my dick like he could drink my insides through my slit. I could still feel that demon's energy in me, coursing through me, and the pleasure from Marc's mouth and throat seemed to chase it in continuous circles.

I bit back a moan and reached down to tangle my fingers in his hair, and he grabbed my hand, moving it to the back of his head. I started moving him forward and back, forward and back, as I spread my legs further apart. When I looked down, I

could only just see him, coming in and out of view as he followed the motion of my hand guiding his swallows.

His fangs grazed my length.

Oh fuck, his fangs.

And claws.

Both hands had changed. I could see one gripping my naked thigh, while I felt the other squeezing my base as he bobbed on my cock. The prick of the talon points... hurt? But it didn't. It hurt, technically, it should have, but I... I liked it. I liked the way it felt when they sliced just slightly into my skin while he sucked me.

I saw a flash of Brent standing over the table and jumped, thinking he'd actually come over. He hadn't. He was still at his table, without that older and strangely familiar man to block any of his view of me. Only the booths had tablecloths, so I saw when Brent reached between his legs to squeeze away the pressure.

The flash came again of him standing right in front of us. I let myself believe it. Let myself see it. I knew it was Marc putting thoughts into my head again, but I didn't care. That must be one of his powers, and right now, I wanted it. I wanted the vision of Brent there, right there, watching me get sucked off, with his cock growing hard while he witnessed it.

I felt Marc's teeth graze over my head, even felt one of the points dip into my slit, and I shivered. Fuck, that felt good. It all felt so good, even when his claws dug so deep, I hissed.

Blood dribbled free from my thigh. I was bleeding, and I didn't care about that either. I watched Marc gather it up with the tip of his claw, look right up at me, with my cock bobbing hot and fat so near his lips, and he dropped a trickle of the blood on his tongue with his eyes flashing red.

I grabbed both sides of his head and shoved my cock back down his throat.

I was being too rough—I thought, I had to be—but Marc growled like he wanted it, and I kept fucking his face, hitting the back of his throat again and again felt like a tunnel of

unrelenting pleasure squeezing my tip. I looked back up at Brent's eyes across the bar—in front of the table, across the bar, in front of the table and right in my face, aching with need to see what he couldn't.

I panted, lips trembling as my mouth hung open, and my breaths grew sharp and shallow. I felt my claws forming too, digging into Marc's hair, right over the start of his growing horns. I rubbed my thumbs over the bulging nubs, and Marc growled again, swallowing me deeper and deeper and—

I shot down Marc's throat, and his fangs pricked me, drawing blood from my dick, so he could drink both fluids. I wanted a taste too and pried his mouth from me so I could swipe a finger in along his cheek and steal some. I stared at him as I licked the pink and pearly smear from my finger, and then looked up to see that Brent was watching too. He couldn't know about the blood, but he definitely knew what else I was licking.

The other man came back from the bathroom, telling Brent it was time to go, and Brent looked so spooked, his whole body tensed. He was pleading for one more minute to finish his beer, which he'd forgotten while watching me get blown by the hottest guy who'd ever stepped foot on our campus. I knew he was rock-hard from how he shifted again as the other guy sat. He squeezed himself so hard, it had to hurt, and I couldn't help grinning.

Marc popped back up beside me, licking his fingers too, which were human again, as was the rest of him. His lips were red though. And shiny. And smug.

What the hell did I just do? I thought, as I scrambled to pull my jeans and underwear back up. What did I let him do? In public? Just to torture or tease or turn on Brent for being a dickhead?

Brent pounded the last of his beer, saying something to the other guy like they could go now, that was enough, but he zipped his jacket before he stood, so it covered him below the waist. It did feel good to have that power over him, and I hated it.

I hated how much I liked it.

“Betcha ol’ Brenty-boy thinks yer hot shit now.” Marc bent closer to me like he was going for a kiss.

I could smell the musk—*my* musk—on his breath and stopped him with a hand on his chest. “I-I... uh...”

Why did I keep letting him do this to me? He was tempting me like demons were supposed to, and I was letting him. I couldn’t keep letting him, or I was going to become just like him. Worse. And... and...

I didn’t even know what I’d do if I became what he wanted me to be.

“Yes, Avi?” Marc batted his eyes at me.

“I-I have to get back to campus for my next class.” Which was a lie. My next class wasn’t for over an hour.

“See ya after then?”

“I have to work tonight.” Though I had planned to call in sick.

“After that?”

“I...”

“Avi,” Marc said in that rumble that made me shiver, “ya can run from me and yer destiny all ya like, but eventually, that next demon is gonna come for ya, and I’m the only one who can teach ya how to win.”

Fuck, he was right, but I slid out of the booth anyway, dragging my backpack after me, and darted for the door without answering.

I knew this wouldn’t be the last time I’d see him.

And I knew I didn’t want it to be the last time either.

CHAPTER SIX

The high from that sloth demon's energy hadn't faded.
Or from Marc's blowjob.

With Brent watching.

Fuck.

Who was that guy who'd been with him? I knew I'd seen him before. One of our professors? No. He was too dressed down, like Brent had been too.

It was hard enough clocking in at Ole's, remembering what had happened behind the shop last night, but I knew if I called off and went home, Marc might be sitting on my stoop. He still might be once I got off work. It was another night of not getting any homework done, but how could I concentrate? I couldn't even draw. I didn't want to. I hadn't gone back for my drawing pad at home, so all I could do was stare forward, and then at the clock, over and over, waiting for my shift to end, and wondering when Marc might show up.

I didn't have to wait long, because around eight o'clock, he walked into the shop.

With Eryn.

"Look who I ran into?" She skipped forward, attached to his arm.

The smug fucker looked so pleased about it too.

"I know, I know!" Eryn said, reading my pissed expression, but not realizing it wasn't for her. "You hate when we bug you at work, but I am so glad you changed your mind

about the Halloween party. I just had to see you. We are going to have so much fun!”

“We... what?” I looked between her and Marc and realized this coup was far worse than I’d thought.

“I didn’t stop in just to bother you. I do actually need a few things. You two chat nice now.” Eryn patted Marc’s arm and skipped off toward the back of the shop.

“I am going to kill you,” I said through a hiss.

“Can it be a little death?” Marc leaned over the counter with his gorgeous smirk firmly in place. “After all, I’ve given ya two now.”

“Marc...”

“We really did just run into each other.”

“Bullshit.”

“Yer not giving me much choice, now, are ya?” At least he was admitting he’d orchestrated this on purpose. “I want us to be mates, so I should be friendly with yer other mates. And we need to prepare before the next avatar arrives. Can’t be sure when it’ll be, and they only get stronger from here.”

Next avatar.

Because there were Seven Deadly Sins, and I’d only killed one.

“I cannot do that six more times.”

“Five. The last should be yer mum, and *you* are her avatar, so... unless ya plan on killing her for the whole abandoning thing—”

“What? No!” I hissed again, glancing to where Eryn had disappeared to be sure she wasn’t headed back yet. “I don’t want to think about that. I don’t want to think about any of this. I hated having to do what I did.”

“Bad liar again.”

“I mean it!”

Marc was practically laying over the counter, leaning into my space like a fox peeking into the henhouse. “Come on, love. Ya liked it. Ya liked how it felt to kill ol’ satyr boy and feed off his essence. And I liked watching and lapping up yer scraps. Seemed someone else liked watching earlier too.”

Brent.

I’d almost thought he might saunter in here and was so glad he hadn’t.

“A lot of bad things feel good,” I said.

“Don’t we just?”

“*Marc*,” I growled—like actually growled, monstrous and primal, and I hated that too and how it made Marc waggle an eyebrow at me.

A noise alerted me to the back of the shop, but it was just one of the fridge doors shutting. Eryn was stalling on purpose to give us more time together, which would have been sweet, if I didn’t want to push Marc out the door.

“What if I left town?” I asked.

“The weaknesses in the veil would only follow ya. Might slow things down, but not prevent anything.”

“Could I just... defeat these avatars and not take over Hell or the world?”

“Trust me, love, yer gonna want to.”

“Humor me and say I won’t.”

At last, Marc pushed back from leaning over the counter, tapping his fingers on top of it. “Yer image, remember? Ya can do whatever ya want with that power. Close off Hell forever? Make a utopia on Earth? Move to the moon with yer own personal harem? Anything. But ya gonna want more than ya think. Yer gonna like what ya become and what ya can do.”

That was what I was afraid of. “Guess I’ll have to work on proving you wrong.”

“So yer in then?” His dazzling smile made my heartbeat stutter. Maybe what I hated most was how much I still liked

him.

This felt way too much like selling one's soul to the Devil—even if I was the Devil's son.

“Like I said with those flowers, love, we can do great things together.”

The problem with great was it didn't mean good. “For now, we can train or whatever, but that's all. Tomorrow.”

Marc swooped in to kiss my cheek just before Eryn arrived to drop her spoils on the counter. “Can't wait.”

“So...” Eryn said leadingly, as I began to ring her up. “What are you two gonna dress up as on Saturday? Couples costume?”

I fought a groan.

Definitely not happening.



AVI'S FRIDAY classes mirrored Wednesday, so we'd have Ethics again together. I wouldn't have had to take on a full course load, naturally, being a fake student, but I'd had a bit of fun choosing a major and forging credits I'd already completed to be well on my way toward a career in Human Resources.

Yes, I thought it was hilarious too.

I had been attending my other classes, since I'd made sure they were scheduled to match Avi's. Ethics was the only course we had together, but we were never out of class at different times. Made it obvious he'd been lying when he ditched me yesterday for a class he didn't have until later, but I couldn't handcuff him to keep him with me.

Maybe later, for different reasons.

So, while he was in one of his senior level Management courses this morning, I had Principles of Effective Coaching. I was trying to mold the next king of Hell. I needed my teaching skills up to snuff.

“Fancy meeting you here!” Eryn dropped down in the seat beside me.

I could hear something like death metal, in German even, coming from her wireless earbuds as she plucked them out and turned them off to stow them away. She had on oversized puffy slacks today with straps that were purely decorative, and a cropped top that was half black tank, half hooded jumper in red and black plaid that left her shoulders bare.

I got a kick out of her fashion sense, as if she’d walked directly out of an ad from the heyday of Hot Topic. I rather enjoyed playing with fashion myself. I could form whatever look I wanted, after all.

“*Love* this!” Eryn picked at the kimono-like jacket over my T-shirt.

“Why thank you. Did I miss the prettiest bird on campus being in my class on Wednesday? I am rightly ashamed.”

She giggled.

I hadn’t missed her. I’d already scoped out Avi’s mates by then, but I’d played it more subtle and hid out in the back of class that day. This one wasn’t as large as the stadium hall for Ethics, more circular, though still with steps since the seating elevated around the room. I’d sat in front today to make sure Eryn spotted me. I was going to be her new favorite person.

“Human Resources track, huh?” She peeked at my notebook. She pulled out an iPad from her shoulder bag, and it lit up with a background of a very stylized Jason from *Friday the 13th*. This bird had layers. “I’m going for life coaching myself. You know, Motivational Speaker type stuff?”

No surprise there. We hadn’t gotten ’round much to anything personal yesterday or even to me and Avi, other than talk about the Halloween party and Eryn’s Directing class. I’d *happened* by the Theater building just as she was leaving

rehearsals. She had somehow managed to squeeze Directing into her approved Create-A-Major and was doing a few scenes from *Waiting for Godot* as part of her senior thesis.

Seriously. Layers.

As we'd chatted last night, I'd eventually mentioned that despite Avi's annoyance at himself for handing over yet another gratis piece of art, he did want to attend Saturday's party and belatedly celebrate his birthday in style, he'd simply been hesitant to be a third wheel. I solved that problem. Eryn had proceeded to drag me to the shop afterward, no prodding necessary.

"We have similar goals then," I said. "I'm trying to be some motivation for Avi. He seems a tad sheltered and unsure of himself. I don't get why. I think he's fabulous."

Eryn preened as if I'd said she was fabulous. "And that is why I love you already. I knew Avi could snag himself a real catch if the right one came along." She playfully shoved my shoulder.

Right one indeed. Now that I had Avi convinced of letting me train him and was winning over his mates, this might end up easier than I'd thought.

And lookie there. Another familiar figure had just strolled in and froze the moment our eyes met. Good ol' Brent. I hadn't noticed him in class on Wednesday, but then, I hadn't cared to pay him any attention.

I waved.

He turned around so fast and dropped into a seat facing away from me that I couldn't tell if he blushed or not. Or popped a stiffy.

Probably both.

Professor Robinson—*Mrs.* Robinson, though hardly an Anne Bancroft—got the class's attention with a gentle pounding on her desk like using a gavel. She was about five foot even, with short gray hair and glasses, but from her diminutive form, her voice carried to fill the whole room.

“Class, it is the first Friday of November, and the holidays are going to cut down the rest of the semester more than you realize. Meaning it is time to start thinking about your final projects which, as I mentioned on day one, are for you to design a four to six page, double-spaced, and detailed coaching plan that could be implemented within an organization to address a specific coaching issue of your choice. You are to outline this in a mocked-up case study, and each of you will be presenting a summary of the project to the class in fifteen-minute time slots.

“I would like you to take today, partnering in groups of two or three, to discuss what you are planning for your projects so far. I’m hoping this will give each of you a starting outline to flesh out while reading the weekend’s assignments. If any questions come up while you’re discussing, I’ll be here all class.”

A hubbub of activity erupted as students started snatching up group members.

I noticed Brent never once turned my direction.

“Partners?” Eryn beamed.

“Couldn’t imagine better.”

We stayed where we were, while others found quiet corners or moved their desks in a circle. I was looking forward to this project. You may be surprised to know that I rather liked learning. Especially anything about humans and how they ticked. Watching you lot through the veil and seeing my masters torture you with possession wasn’t the same as interaction. I knew that to really understand you, and therefore Avi, I needed a peek inside.

In every sense of the word.

“Trade our basic topics to start?” I asked.

“Hit me with it.” Eryn leaned forward and daintily dropped her chin on her hands.

“Building confidence in high-stress fields.” Which was what I felt encapsulated Avi’s problem. I had to get him from not wanting to be king to *it’s good to be the king*.

“Mine’s really similar!” Eryn bounced, pressing her hands down on the desk to push herself taller. “But focused on the psychology behind *why* some people feel they can’t be more confident.”

Perfect.

“Well—” I tried.

“A big problem these days is self-victimization,” she went on, clearly not having heard me. “Say, someone says, oh, I’m an introvert, so I can’t do that. Or I’m a woman, so I’ll always have a tougher time.

“While an introvert and a woman might have a more difficult time advancing their careers due to the systemic problems of society today, believing that that’s enough reasoning for why you’ll fail can cause you to fail before you even try. You self-sabotage, don’t try as hard, or not at all, because you assume you can’t overcome your obstacles, so why waste the effort?

“Usually, those beliefs stem from other deeper-rooted problems that the person needs to work through to regain their confidence and realize they can beat any societal restraints if they just get down to the root of their pessimism.” She finally took a breath, and then sank back in her seat like she’d only just realized how much she’d spat at me. “Sorry! I’m a rambler.”

She was bloody brilliant, is what she was.

She was going to help me turn a killjoy into a king.

“Whadda ya say to a more formal partnership with these projects, assuming the prof approves?” I didn’t at all curb my enthusiasm since she never curbed hers. “We aid each other’s research with our parallel theses. You on how someone with systemic roadblocks can overcome self-sabotage, and me on how someone with no systemic roadblocks might self-sabotage anyway. We are our own worst enemies after all.”

“Love it!” Eryn grabbed my hands like we were making a blood pact. “That might even be publishable! Eeee! I can so see why Avi took to you. You know, I haven’t even heard how

you two met.” She released me and started swipe-texting notes onto her iPad like conducting an orchestra.

“It’s a simple story really,” I said.

It was—when ya left out the death and dismemberment bits.

I told her all about the PG version and looked forward to later with Avi even more.



“DODGE!”

Avi leapt out of the way, flapping his wings to ascend above where my admittedly paltry bolt of hellfire had barely scorched the earth where he’d been standing.

It still set the hem of his jeans fire.

“Shit!”

He dropped back down just behind where I’d smoldered the grass, furiously trying to stomp out the flames from frying his denim. I don’t think he realized how little my fire could injure him compared to how his had almost killed me. His fortitude wouldn’t do him as much good if an avatar’s blow struck true.

After the fire died, Avi worriedly glanced in each direction while tucking his wings in tight against his back. Despite the energy he’d fed from yesterday, it looked like he’d shrunk a bit back to his original transformation. No corded teal muscle adorned his neck or formed out of the skin along his shoulders. He was shirtless, but only because he’d removed said shirt, and his lower half was recently charred denim.

“Are you sure no one can see us?” Avi fidgeted.

“This is one of my tribe’s base powers,” I explained—yet again. I dropped down from where I’d been hovering and crossed my arms. As predicted, his backyard made for an

adequate sparring space once I'd shielded us, but the open air was clearly a distraction for him.

We had literally watched his neighbor get home, grab the mail, and look right through us.

"Illusions, remember? Stronger than anything the other tribes can manage. Most demons can take on a human appearance, but making people see anything and everything we want is my tribe's gift. All anyone can see if looking into yer yard right now is empty grass."

"Okay..." Avi chewed his lip, but his fangs were so dull, he barely reddened 'em.

He'd been admittedly standoffish in Ethics, scooting his chair as far as possible from mine when I sat down beside him. He'd finally answered my persistent pestering during class by showing me his mobile, which had a text from Eryn that read:

OMG, I love Marc so much! He is perfect and adores you.

I'd whispered into his ear, "She's not wrong."

Problem was, he didn't believe it.

I was perfect, thanks.

And I did adore him. He was everything I'd ever needed to change my fate.

It was the same span of the afternoon as our first date on Wednesday, giving us plenty of time before he had to work, and dear old dad was long gone before we'd arrived. Not that I cared. I was actually quite curious about him. But before letting me inside, Avi had tiptoed in and quietly called into the house to be certain his father had left for work.

I tongued my fangs, a mostly unconscious habit whenever I spotted someone else's who were especially impressive or *less* impressive than mine, the latter being Avi's at the moment. At least the act made his eyes follow the path of my tongue. He liked my fangs, and I wanted to sink them into his neck while feeling his sink into mine. But they had to grow sharp again for that to happen.

Avi averted his eyes, reciting, “Every tribe has unique abilities. But we won’t even know which avatar is coming next until they’re here?”

“They’ll be fighting each other over who gets to the gaps in the veil first, and only one demon can push through before that gap closes again—until the last, when it’ll be a bit more of a free-for-all.”

Avi’s horns and wings shrunk further. “But I... I can stop it, right? Close the veil or reinforce it or something so it doesn’t break completely?”

“Possibly.”

“*Possibly?*”

“Possibly. It’s new territory, mate. I don’t know anything for certain. But yes, possibly.” More like probably, but I needed him to want to grow in power. “Look, Sloth was all brute force and smashing, yeah? But the others aren’t gonna come through guns blazin’. They’re smarter than that. They’ll be more subtle, use different tactics.”

“Then what’s the point of dodging fireballs? Shouldn’t I be focusing on fighting special abilities? Like, what else can your tribe do?”

I grinned.

Avi’s eyes widened and he nearly tripped backward as he immediately regretted the question.

“Our illusion magic can work both in reality and in the mind.” I forced into his thoughts the memory of our fellating festivities at the Toadstool with Brent watching. Then a new image of Brent fellating me in my Coaching class.

“*Hey,*” Avi growled.

Jealous type. Good.

I advanced on him, crossing the span of the yard between us, and made myself as tall as possible, which again, was nearly a foot taller than him since he hadn’t yet learned to grow his feet.

“Our kiss can be quite poisonous. Any of our fluids really. But only if we want. And of course...” I reached him and tilted his head up with a curl of a talon under his chin. “Our touch can instill both pleasure and pain—”

Avi jerked backward.

“I was only going to demonstrate the pleasure part.” I dropped my hand in disappointment. “Though I do think ya enjoy a mix.”

He ducked his head, clearly not wanting to admit that.

“No point in training to thwart special abilities, Avi, if ya can’t even dodge a basic attack. Ya only managed with satyr boy ’cause sloths are slow, even the time it took for his jump to reach ya. The real problem is yer distracted.”

“Well—” He cut off even as his fists clenched, and he glared at me with a pretty pout. “How can I not be when you’re manipulating my best friend against me?”

“Am not.”

“Marc...”

“In your best interest, not against you.”

He groaned and threw his hands up in the air. “You could also stop acting like we’re a couple. I didn’t say anything to Eryn last night because I didn’t want to deal with the fallout, but I do not want to go to that Halloween party as your... date.”

“And why not?”

“Brent will be there.”

“So ya want Brent, is it?”

“No!” Avi paced a short line back and forth in front of me. “It’s mortifying seeing him, don’t you get that? I spotted him in the halls earlier and he bolted like I had the plague.”

“Sounds to me like he’s the mortified one ’cause he may have liked it a bit too much watching ya get yer dick sucked.”

Avi growled again, and the way it made his horns lengthen, and his fangs and claws go a tad sharper, went straight to my neglected dick. “Just because you’re a lust demon, is sex all you think about?”

Said the half-human, half-demon male who I knew was also always thinking about it.

“For the record, all demons are amorous beings. My tribe’s just better at it.”

That smile I could always coax from him surfaced, but then faded just as fast.

“Listen, pretending we’re a couple is gonna make all this easier, ’cause no one will ask any questions about me, yeah? Of course, *not* pretending would be my preference.” I lifted my hand toward him, but he ducked out of reach again.

He wouldn’t look at me, but he didn’t seem to want to look at himself either, and every time his eyes darted to something other than one of us, which was basically constant now, he shifted to being a little more human.

What were his deep-rooted reasons for distrusting himself so much and denying the desires he clearly had? Which I was also certain he’d had for far longer than when his demon half surfaced.

I had to keep digging, but I knew some of it stemmed from how he saw himself physically, whether like this or in a hoodie and cap.

“Do ya think yerself a monster now, Avi?”

He hunched smaller.

“Do ya think... *me* a monster?”

“You’re a demon,” he said with a crinkle of his brow, but his eyes raised to mine.

“Not what I asked.”

“Aren’t demons inherently monstrous?”

“Ouch. Does that mean ya don’t like how I look?”

I drew one of my hands up my stomach and chest, purposely over the ridges that were deeper grooves than any definition on a human, like I was molded from something harder, more alien, but I knew Avi liked himself a good alien.

His eyes widened, as he watched the trail of my ascending claws and let himself really look at me, something I knew now he'd been trying to avoid. He seemed ashamed of what he'd said, and I won't say I didn't appreciate that.

To most demons, I was too human. A lesser creation. They liked the look of me, my pretty face like a human and more delicate form—delicate compared to them—but I was for pleasure alone. *Their* pleasure. My skills with finding veil tears had proven I had other uses, but I was still very much used.

All demons that manifested from human thought were treated as such. The *real* demons were the first, the princes and their immediate underlings born of Hell itself. Yer basic demons were the ones born from them. But my kind were considered impure, good for nothing but to be used as slaves.

Avi looked more like my kind right now than any of my betters, but we could *both* become better.

“Do ya like how I look, Avi?” I reclaimed the space he'd put between us, moving slowly but reaching to take his hand that I brought to my stomach and started retracing the path I'd gone with my own.

His eyes remained wide, gleaming that beautiful teal, and he gasped the first time his fingers passed over one of my ridges.

Some of them followed the lines of a human ribcage. Others were almost tribal in design, curlicuing this way or that. A few, though even I didn't remember which ones anymore, had been carved into me by one or more of my masters, inflicted specially to make sure they stayed, most of which I'd enjoyed getting.

Most. Not that I'd ever had a choice.

“Avi...?” I asked in a whisper, prompting him again.

My scars from him were completely healed now, but he moved his hand to that spot, with mine hovering over his, letting him lead. “Yes,” he admitted, as his fingers splayed over the smooth skin.

“Then why can’t ya like it of you?”

His eyes flashed to mine like epiphany had dawned, and I saw the muscle-like additions of his mantle reform, twisting up his neck and over his shoulders. He felt it happening and reached to touch the new corded texture, while keeping one hand on me. He smiled again, as if he’d forgotten he was allowed to like this, to like who and what he was.

Avi noticed his jeans were gone, that lovely little speedo back with its half skirt train. His tail flicked like an excited puppy, but then he frowned, pulled away from me, with uncertainty clawing back.

“I—”

“For now, we work on reflexes and basic combat,” I said before he could start to question things again. He’d settle into his skin. He’d transcend it. Even if I had to dissect his entire psyche to get him there. “We’ll deal with the rest later. I’m no warrior myself, but even I know how to dodge.”

Avi laughed, and his tension loosened a little. “Okay. Let’s go again.”

“And don’t try to fight how yer body wants to change,” I said, taking flight to return to my previous hovering. “It’s who ya are now, Avi. And you are *beautiful*.”

He blushed—well, as much as his paler and now somewhat grayish skin tone could—but squared off to prepare for my attack without countering my praises.

“Yer wardrobe could use an uptick though. The normal one. Later.”

“What later?” He faltered as I started to summon another fireball.

“We need to go shopping, don’t we? Couples costume.” I grinned and fired the blast before he had time to regroup.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Even black bedding, eh?” Marc bounced on my mattress and stroked the top of my plush comforter, which Dad had always joked looked like I’d skinned a Muppet. “Black’s not really the best for hiding those impromptu nightly emissions though—”

“Don’t start,” I snapped, and then returned to my reflection, picking at the harness and the way it strained over the exposed part of my chest. “I cannot wear this in public.”

I should have expected it, but when I’d refused to go shopping with Marc, he’d shown up at my door Saturday afternoon with costumes already chosen. I was surprised he hadn’t simply brought me a thong and pasties to wear, but the reality wasn’t much better.

His idea of a clever couples costume was an angel and devil—with him as the angel.

That meant my costume was black hot pants with a tight shiny red vest, little black and red demon wings that secured under the vest with a harness that looked way too similar to the actual harness of Marc’s demon appearance, and a red half-mask with coiling horns out the top.

At least Marc’s costume had a tunic. A very short tunic. *Very* short, and I was convinced he wasn’t wearing underwear beneath. The white feathered wings, haloed headband, and gold bangles sold the whole thing if not for his obviously demonic smirk.

“No way. No *way*,” I said again, staring in horror at my reflection in the full-length mirror behind my bedroom door.

I hadn't let him into my bedroom. I hadn't let him into the house. He'd knocked and shouldered his way in when I stupidly answered the door without checking first to see who was there. Then he'd carted me right to my bedroom to have me try this on.

I'd made him turn around while I did, not that I believed he hadn't snuck a peek.

"I've already seen ya naked," he'd said, "and had your dick in my—"

"*Shush.*"

My room was fairly neat. Most of the furniture was thrift store finds, but it made for an eclectic mix for my dresser, nightstand, and drawing desk, all different design styles, painted or stained black to match. I didn't have any posters up. My walls were covered in prints of my favorite drawings over the years, so the same monochrome and macabre atmosphere extended from floor to ceiling. Even the mirror, while second-hand, had antique gilding to its black frame.

I hadn't meant for it to be so goth, I just liked it. I felt like myself in here, felt comforted by the dark and weird and twisted. Besides the Giger influences in my drawings, some of my older works were interpretations of modern monsters like Slender Man or Lovecraftian classics like Cthulhu. There was even a self-portrait I'd done of what I'd look like in the world of *A Nightmare Before Christmas*.

I had bat wings and horns.

Now I did for real.

Though not these hard plastic ones. I pushed the mask up, so it rested on my head. "I need to take this off."

"Now we're talking."

"To *change.*"

Marc groaned and pushed up from the bed. "Are ya that against yer classmates, Brent and those other frat boys, seeing how hot ya can be?"

"I'm not—"

“Yer scorching, Avi. Didn’t we cover that yesterday? Especially now that ya stopped squashing down that hair.”

I was not about to admit that, when I woke up with the usual bedhead that morning, I’d maybe changed into my demon form briefly to fluff it up. It looked really good when it turned white, and when I changed back to human, it always kept its shape.

I guess I didn’t look terrible in the costume, but I’d never worn anything so skimpy in public before. I never worked out, and even if I did have good muscle definition for being so skinny and small, it still would have made more sense for me to be the angel—which I got was the joke.

“But an angel and devil, really?”

“I know. I have a marvelous sense of humor.” Marc chuckled. “Come here though. Needs a bit o’ something.” He came toward me, and in the reflection, I saw him pull out a pencil from his pocket, which I was seriously impressed the tunic had, given there wasn’t much fabric to work with.

“Eyeliner? I’m not—”

“Quit it now and trust yer elders.” Marc turned me around to face him and held the back of my neck, holding me close and steady and making my breath stutter.

Elder. I had no idea how old he was. Hundreds? Thousands? He might only mean elder in terms of having been a demon longer, but it could also be a lot more than a Jedi and Padawan age gap.

“Accentuation, even with *guyliner*, has its place.” Marc applied the deep black so smoothly beneath my eyes, I barely had to blink. “And this outfit absolutely screams for it. Close ’em now for the top part.”

I did. I kept following his lead and obeying his orders, even when I didn’t want to.

He was supposed to be obeying mine.

He’d said he’d do anything I asked of him, and sometimes I wondered how far I could push that. I had a pretty good idea

on a few things.

“Hmm, those blond lashes need a little work too. Look up.”

Again, I listened, opening my eyes and staring toward the ceiling. He had mascara now, which I assumed had also come from his pocket—or a pocket dimension. When he was done, he moved his hand from my neck along my cheek to my chin and tilted it up like he had with his claws yesterday.

I’d wanted him to kiss me so badly then that I’d spooked myself into retreating. He’d said his touch could bring pleasure and pain, like a freaking Cenobite, and just like in *Hellraiser*, I wondered what it might be like to experience both.

Or to inflict it.

“Beautiful,” Marc said, leaning closer.

He was wearing eyeliner and mascara too, and it looked amazing on him, but he was also walked-off-a-model-shoot perfect, with flawless dark skin compared to my paleness, reddish hair, reddish eyes, both so much redder beneath his guise, and with sharper edges to his body that were closer to the drawings on my walls.

I’d worked more on my drawing of him, the sketchpad still out on my desk but thankfully closed. I wasn’t about to tell him that, but I’d wanted to add more detail to it after waking up this morning and thinking about how it had felt to touch his ridges.

“Beautiful,” he said again, but rather than finally kiss me—he still hadn’t once kissed my lips—he turned me to face the mirror.

I looked... good. The contrast of the black makeup made my eyes pop almost as much as if they were glowing. It was easier to think of my demon form as beautiful, because it was strange and new. I’d lived with this body all my life and had never thought it was anything special. But Marc seemed to. He seemed to like both, fluttering the side of my hair with his too-close breath as he came up behind me in the reflection.

I liked how much bigger he was than me, with more muscle, and seriously so sexy, maybe more so dressed in the ridiculousness of an angel getup, that my hot pants felt, well, tighter than they already were.

“Yer so beautiful, Avi, that all I can think about is tearing all this off ya.” He kissed beneath my ear and my cock jumped.

“Marc...”

“Yes, Avi?” He licked where he’d kissed and met my gaze in the mirror with a flash of his eyes turning red and his fangs lengthening.

I heard a car door slam.

I spun around to see if my dad’s truck was outside. He’d gone out to do errands after waking, and I’d never been so glad to be home alone given the company I was keeping, but I couldn’t tell if he was back. I’d closed the curtains and Marc’s body was blocking me.

His *hard* body with one nipple showing since the tunic only went over one shoulder. I’d braced my hands against him as I turned, my thumb right beside that exposed nipple, and I unconsciously brushed it.

Marc hummed and brought his hands up to rest over mine. How did he always smell so good, like pink pepper and cinnamon, making my nose tingle? And he looked so good, with his perfect face and perfect hair, whether demon or otherwise. His skin was soft too. It had felt just as soft yesterday when I touched his ridges, those strange grooves along his body. I had some now too. Sort of. More like armor that had formed over my neck and shoulders, or out of them like connected skin.

I wanted to summon it all now, to form my claws, dig them deep into the tender spots between Marc’s grooves, and crash our mouths together with a clack of fangs, sucking on his tongue until I tasted blood.

The front door opened.

“I’m back!”

Fuck!

“Get out.” I pushed Marc so hard, he nearly toppled.

“What?”

“I’ll meet you later! Get out!” I ordered in a frantic whisper.

“Avi.” He stepped back toward me. “The exit’s behind ya.”

“The window then, go!”

“Av—”

“Avriel?”

My door started to open, and I had to scramble out of the way to avoid it hitting me, pushing Marc further inside, which meant my hands were back on his chest, and his went to my hips, just as my dad’s head peeked in.

“Hey, is everything—oh.”

My eyes snapped to Marc’s to be sure they weren’t red, and they had blessedly faded to human brown, and his fangs were gone. I lurched away from him, turning to face Dad and trying to think of something to say. Anything.

Anything at all.

“Hello.” Dad pushed the door the rest of the way open. “Well. Look at you two.”

In our skimpy outfits, he meant, alone in my room with the door closed. I was twenty-one, an adult, but this wasn’t exactly normal for me.

“We have a Halloween party tonight!” I blurted.

“Oh,” Dad said again, apparently as tongue-tied as I was. “Sure, sure. You look... good. Might be a bit chilly.”

Marc snorted, and I elbowed him in the side.

“I’ll grab a jacket before we leave,” I said. Preferably a long one that I could hide in all night. If I couldn’t handle Dad seeing me like this, there was no way I could handle someone like Brent.

“Is this the young man who sent you flowers?” Dad asked, seeing as how I wasn’t introducing Marc and really didn’t know where to start.

“It is,” Marc said. “Everyone should get flowers on their birthday. Marc Smythe, Mr. Dermot.” He stepped forward to take my dad’s hand. “Pleasure to meet ya.”

They shook, and so far, nothing imploded, as much as I sort of wished I would.

“Nathan is fine, but I appreciate the manners. Avriel doesn’t usually let me meet any of his boyfriends.”

That’s because I’d never had any. “I wasn’t ready for you to meet Marc either. Sorry! It’s just new and—”

“Hey, I won’t cramp your style.” Dad took a step back like he might leave us alone, but then he hovered in the doorway. “Big party tonight, huh?”

“Yeah. We’re meeting Eryn and Fry in like half an hour, so...” I wasn’t sure what the end of that sentence was going to be.

“Oh,” Dad said *again*, seeming disappointed. I’d neglected to tell him about the party, mostly because I’d still been hoping to avoid it. “We haven’t even had any of that cake yet.”

The *cake*. I was the worst son imaginable. The only reason we hadn’t been able to celebrate my birthday was because he’d been working, and now here I was running away on his first day off. Maybe I could still back out of going—

“We should do that then.” Marc wrapped an arm around my shoulders, carefully avoiding the demon wings, which paled in comparison to my *real* wings, or his, for that matter. “If I’m allowed to join, that is? We’ve got a bit of time yet, yeah? Just be careful not to get any frosting on the outfit, eh, love?” He winked at me.

I laughed, more like a delirious combination of *help* and *I am so going to kill you later*.

“Great!” Dad said, in that way of trying to sound like he meant it tone that he was not pulling off. “Of course, you can

join us, Marc. We should do that. Yeah. Let's have cake. It'll give me the chance to get to know you."

Because that wasn't my greatest nightmare come to life.

Dad turned, motioning for us to follow, and Marc reached down from my shoulders to pinch my bare ass cheek that was far too accessible with how short these hot pants were.

I elbowed him so hard this time that he oomphed like it actually hurt.

Good.

"Oh, do you know anything about those brown spots in the backyard?" Dad asked.

As in *burn* spots from Marc's hellfire. "Uh... figured it was just Fall weather."

Dad nodded like that was as good an explanation as any.

A minute ago, I was going to tear Marc's clothes off and make a bloody and panting mess out of him until my cock burst, and now we were having cake—me, my dad, and my fake demon boyfriend, while I was wearing a demon costume and Marc was dressed like an angel.

I couldn't keep letting him tempt me like this. It was making me crazy, making me crave violence and blood and sex in tandem, and that was *not normal*. I knew I had to trust Marc to help with training to defeat the avatars, but I didn't want the rest of it. I couldn't, feeling the desire for more and more continuing to grow in me until I fulfilled some awful destiny and became something unrecognizable. I didn't want that. I didn't *want* to want it.

We were only pretending to be dating, damn it! And even if we weren't, I wasn't supposed to want *Marchosias*. I was supposed to want Marc, just the hot guy I'd met in Ethics who liked my art, had similar interests, and kissed my cheek.

But I couldn't have that because that's not who he was. And instead, every time he touched me, or I touched him, I wondered if his cock, which I hadn't seen but had felt against

my backside when he palmed me after we defeated Sloth, was ridged like the rest of him.

“What are you majoring in, Marc?” Dad asked as if this was totally normal.

At least Marc pretended it was and didn’t say anything lewd or too weird. He was a perfect gentleman, talking normally about his plans to work in Human Resources after college—which, so not funny, and I totally saw the twinkle in his eyes when I scowled at him after he said it. Marc was a charmer though. He’d certainly charmed me and kept charming me into insane and erotic situations.

Like this outfit that was so not meant for sitting and was flossing my butt, but at least how tight it was helped keep my erection down.

The cake was good too, even for a few days old. My favorite: white with a layer of lemon curd in the middle and fluffy lemony buttercream on top. After we’d been finished for a bit, with coffee Dad put on, and only another slice or two left in the cake box, Dad started gathering our plates.

“I got it.” Marc stood, stacking them and folding closed the box to put back in the fridge. “I am the guest, after all.”

Perfect gentleman.

Wearing a tunic so short that, with it ridden up from sitting, that I could see he was indeed *not* wearing underwear until it fell back into place to cover him—luckily before Dad glanced back and offered him his thanks.

Then Dad turned to face me and fixed me with a patient but prodding stare. “So...”

“Do I want to know the end of that question?”

“He’s just... not who I pictured you with.”

Because he was outgoing and sexy and so out of my league, my brain supplied, but instead I asked, “An angel?”

Dad chuckled. “Well...”

I had to wonder again if there were things Dad knew and just never told me, but how in *Hell* was I supposed to ask that?

“Knock, knock!”

The front door opened with barely an actual knock sounding before Eryn and Fry walked in. We did have an open-door policy with them, but it reminded me that I was in more like the stripper version of a demon costume, and I leapt up from the table like I intended to bolt—and wasn’t sure if it was better to pick my wedgie in front of everyone or let more of my ass cheeks hang out.

“Hot stuff, Avi!” Eryn squealed, rushing toward me with impressive speed given the taller than usual platforms she was wearing.

She and Fry were dressed as interpretations of R2-D2 and C3PO from *Star Wars*, with Eryn in a gothic Lolita style white dress and blue wig, and Fry wearing an all-gold lame suit with steampunk glasses to mimic 3PO’s eyes. The way Eryn had hand-painted on details to make her dress look more like R2 was seriously well done. She even had a Millennium Falcon shaped purse.

“You look amazing!” she cooed at me.

“Thanks.” I ducked my head, almost causing the mask to fall forward, but I caught it and kept it lifted. “You too. But I thought we were meeting at the CAS house?” Which was a lot easier to say than Chi Alpha Sigma every time. “Wasn’t it out of your way to come here first?” Especially since Fry lived there, and Eryn lived on campus.

“We had to give you your birthday present, didn’t we?”

Right.

“Lovely as always, Miss Schiffer.” Marc playfully bowed, joining us in the living room. “Ya clean up nice too, Mr. Johnson.”

Fry answered with an appreciative grunt.

“I’ll get out of the way for you kids,” Dad said, gathering up our empty mugs. “You have fun tonight and... be... safe

and all.”

My face never felt more on fire from how awkward he’d made that sound, and I was pretty sure meaning it exactly the way I thought he did.

“Aww, you don’t have to go, Mr. N.!” Eryn always called him that, which I guess was better than Mr. *D*.

“It’s fine, Eryn. I think I’ve embarrassed Avriel enough for one night.” He came over to kiss the side of my hair, and then shook Marc’s hand again. “It was nice meeting you, son.”

“You too, Mr. Dermot.”

“Nathan. Please.”

Best dad ever. Even if he did know about Mom, about me, and had lied my entire life, I was the one lying now.

“We’ll do something fun just us tomorrow, okay?” I promised.

“That sounds great, kiddo.”

Dad took the mugs to the kitchen and then went into his office.

“Present time!” Eryn pulled a small, wrapped gift from her purse and thrust it into my hands.

Marc put an arm around my waist, and I felt him discreetly tug the edge of my hot pants down, which made me tilt up onto my toes, thinking he’d pinch my butt cheeks again, but it actually helped a lot.

“It’s from both of us.” Eryn leaned against Fry, who pulled her close and smiled.

She’d been implying things about it for months, that it was something from when we met, something I could wear and keep forever as a reminder of good times. I’d also gotten the impression that it cost way more than I’d want anyone to spend on me, even if they’d split it.

The wrapping was black with a red bow, so it matched my outfit, as did what lay inside, because when I pried open the

top of the box that was clearly going to contain jewelry, I found a blast from the past.

“The Horadrim necklace?” I was almost afraid to touch it because this did not look like some cheap recreation.

It was from *Diablo III*, the game where Eryn and I met. The symbol, admittedly a little Eye of Sauron looking since the top had a circular amber stone with a slit through it like an eye’s pupil, was the sign for the magical order in the game that fought against demons. The frame was a figure eight or infinity symbol in bronze with the amber stone set into the top circle, but it didn’t connect at the bottom like a normal figure eight, coming instead to parallel points.

“Wow, this... I didn’t think they made these anymore.”

“They don’t,” Eryn said, “other than knockoffs, but we had it crafted specially. See?” She turned the pendant over.

It *was* custom, because on the back was engraved:

Auriel

Crusader of Light

“I know, I know. It’s silly,” Eryn said as I continued to stare—and wonder just what prank the universe was playing on me. “But after this year, if we get scattered to the winds out in the real world—which you better not let happen; I will stalk you and hunt you down—I never want you to forget how we met. Defending the world against demons!” She giggled.

My blood went cold while she snatched it out of the box to hook the chain around my neck. It felt weighty and warm against my skin.

“Which is especially funny given your costume.” She giggled again.

She had no idea.

I loved it though, even if it did feel like a cosmic joke. It complemented my costume well and hung right between the

harness straps. “Thank you. This is really awesome, guys. Seriously.”

Eryn hugged me. Fry fist-bumped me, and then took the wrapping from me to pass me an envelope.

“What’s this?” I opened it to find a wad of twenties. “Cash? Why?”

“From Brent. Guess he felt bad.” Fry shrugged.

“You didn’t pester him or anything, did you?” I frowned at all three of them.

Marc held up his hands, Eryn shook her head, and Fry shrugged again.

“Just gave it to me.”

“Must have finally realized yer worth paying for.” Marc squeezed me against his side.

I elbowed him again, and he coughed to cover it.

“Ready?” Eryn bounced with excitement.

I wasn’t, but I joked to myself that at least I had an amulet against demons now.

Not that it prevented the one beside me from pinching my butt again on the way out the door.



TURNED out the simplest of human pleasantries like having arm candy in the packaging of a scanty-clad store-bought demon costume and chatting with my new mates while walking up a long street was rather... enjoyable. I even liked the conversation. It wasn’t blood orgy fun, but it was nice to get a break from my previous Saturday nights.

“The *Slumber Party Massacre* remake was... okay,” Eryn was saying, having launched into a discussion of recent horror movie remakes while we traipsed up the hill to the line of frat

houses closest to campus, “but it could have been brilliant with a few tweaks.”

“I liked it,” Avi said.

“Agreed,” I added. “Can’t go wrong with strapping young blokes having a pillow fight in their knickers.”

“*You* saw it?” Avi blinked at me through his mask. The little red demon face and curly horns were adorable, just like the rest of him.

“Of course. I happen to be a fan of subversion revisions of the horror genre. Keeps the audience on their toes.” I tilted my head down to bump my forehead against his mask and saw his cheeks flush nearly the same color.

“You two are so cute,” Eryn gushed, eternally attached to strong, silent Fry.

“Right,” Avi grumbled, leaning away from me, even while clinging to my arm to keep up the ruse of us dating.

But I knew I could steer this from fake to fornicating in no time.

I almost had earlier.

The frat house came into view, with a good amount of partying spilling onto the lawn, the whole building decorated like a haunted house, but the jovial bright lights and cartoon cat cutout kind, not truly spooky. When enough eyes spotted our approaching group, Avi clung to me even tighter, which I didn’t mind one bit.

“Why didn’t you let me grab a jacket?” he hissed.

“What for?”

“It’s fifty degrees out!”

That hadn’t been enough to prompt Eryn to bring one. Would have ruined her ensemble. I knew the real reason Avi wanted one was to hide in it, and tonight, he was going to be on full display and learn to love it.

“Avi, haven’t ya noticed yet that ya don’t really feel the cold anymore?” I whispered.

“I... I don’t?” I saw the moment when realization struck. The chill was definitely present, especially with the sun going down, but it wasn’t enough to even give him shivers. “Wow...”

“Demon constitution has its perks, yeah?”

“Come one, come all! Enter our den of iniquity! And don’t forget to pay the toll!” A lad at the door had a coffee tin that tinkled when he shook it—with planted coins, I assumed, since everyone was paying in bills.

He was dressed quite classically like the Devil, with pitchfork, red plastic horns, and a suit and cape, very Gary Marshall from *Hocus Pocus*. I’d have guessed it would have been Brent guarding the threshold, but it was some ginger-haired bloke.

“Johnson.” He nodded at Fry and let him and Eryn walk in without paying but held up a hand when we tried to follow. “Toll, please.”

“But... Brent said—”

“I believe our toll has been paid,” I jumped in, “seeing as how my date made those pretty little posters for ya.” I nodded at the one on the inside of the door.

“*Dermot?*” Ginger Devil’s eyes widened, and he leaned closer to Avi, trying to see through his mask, and then glanced down his taut little body a bit too perusing for my liking. “Shit. Didn’t recognize you. Sweet digs, man. Go on in.”

Smart lad. Would have had to have a chat with ol’ Brenty-boy if we’d had to give back the same cash he’d wisely sent over with Fry.

Inside was the typical college frat house affair, but not so rowdy or drunken yet as to warrant a ring to the bobbies. Ginger Devil was carding people at the door if he didn’t know ‘em, the music was a decent level, so folks could still hear each other, and the promised food and booze was abundant.

“Let’s party!” Eryn declared.

And party we did.

Who knew boring human drinking games could be not so boring after all? It would also seem us demons excelled at a game called Tippy Cup, 'cause Avi and I slaughtered the competition by downing our succession of shot-volume filled SOLO cups and flipping the empties from upside down to right side up again. Made a terrible mess of dribbling beer on the table, but I didn't have to clean it.

Our win was worth at least a round of shots.

“To the battle against demons!” I raised my glass in a toast.

Avi's eyes bulged, before he remembered his birthday present and clutched the pendant.

Eryn promptly thrust her cup up to join mine. Even protective big brother Fry was warming to me and joined as well, though I think he talked less with a few pints in him.

Finally, Avi joined too.

“Cheers!” he said and mashed cups with the rest of us.

The music switched to something especially upbeat.

“I love this one!” Eryn cried and tossed her and Fry's cups aside before dragging him toward the dancefloor.

Avi stared at his now empty cup. “How come I'm not more drunk? I mean, I feel it a little...”

“Disappointed?”

“Maybe. Demon constitution?”

“'Fraid so. Yer not a cheap date no more.” I took his empty and kissed his cheek just beneath the fall of his mask. “I'll get ya another.”

He was resisting my charms—or trying to—but he was also having a good time. So was I, truth be told. Bit nice to have a breather before the next battle.

I mixed up a quick Captain and Coke for us both with the bottles available. Dangerous to let everyone free pour but I hadn't seen a bartender keeping tabs. When I headed back to

where I'd left Avi, it seemed someone else had sidled up in my absence.

Brent.

I'd been wondering where he was hiding.

Demon hearing is better than the average bloke's, so even from a few paces back and with the music blaring, I picked up on Brent's introductory sputters.

"Y-you, um... look good!" He'd snuck up behind Avi, making him jump and spin around. Brent had gone with the Man of Steel, which was a tad on the nose given his coloring. He'd even managed that dainty little curl from classic Superman.

I was partial to the newest version, personally. That Tyler Hoechlin bloke was a feast for the eyes. I didn't much care for Avi being a feast for Brent's though, especially if he thought he could steal him away.

"Thanks." Avi hunched.

Brent gestured away from the crowded entryway between the dance floor and where I'd gone to grab drinks. "Could we maybe talk somewhere? Alone?"

"Uh..."

"Hello, Brenty-boy." I swooped in, draping my arm over Avi's shoulders with the hand that held my drink, while I passed him his. "Haven't officially met yet, have we? All up close and personal like. I'm Marc."

We were eye to eye in height, but Brent's spooked expression made him look a tad smaller. If I didn't know better, I'd think he could see right through to my fangs. "Hey. You two... enjoy the party." He scurried away.

Bye, bye, Brenty.

"*Marc*," Avi growled. "He wasn't being a complete dick. He paid for the poster. *We* were the dicks."

"Maybe, but I do think he wants a taste o' yers, and that belongs to me now."

“Oh really?” Avi rolled his shoulders to get out from under my hold. He didn’t storm off, but he sipped his drink with a visible scowl behind his mask.

I tilted it up to see his face and the penetrating boldness of his eyes outlined in black. “I’d certainly like it to,” I said, soft and rumbly over the top of my cup. I tongued the rim before taking a long drink, never moving my eyes from his, and he choked on his next swallow. “I belong to you, Avi. I serve *you*. Ya could ask me to drop to my knees right here, and I’d yank down those tight little trunks and open my mouth with eagerness.”

Avi squirmed, at risk of those shorts popping at the seams all on their own. “I’m sure you would.” He took another drink, averting his eyes.

He didn’t want seduction. He did, but he wanted romance to go with it, to believe we were more than monsters, and I could oblige. My pillow talk was as good as my pillow biting, thanks.

The song was a slow one now, by some whispery bird with a sultry beat. The change hadn’t deterred Eryn and Fry, who were swaying closer and enjoying the tempo.

“Or... I could offer to dance.” I downed the rest of my drink, which was no mean feat, but I could swallow plenty in one go.

Avi hesitated but then did the same, and I pulled him onto the dance floor before he could change his mind. I tugged him close, chest to chest and hips connected, moving our bodies slow and sensual enough that we’d have melted Patrick Swayze’s brain if he’d been out there with us.

I wondered if Avi had been half hard this whole time, just enough to like the feel of the pleather straining against him, but not so sprung as to call attention. I felt his cock twitch now, finding mine through the thin cotton of my tunic.

He shuddered and coiled his hands up around my neck. “I feel like everyone’s looking at us.”

He'd been appreciating the anonymity of the mask, as it didn't seem most people had recognized him. More had started to after a bit, and I'd caught whispers from some wondering if it was really him, who I was, and how had Avi Dermot possibly snagged such a catch?

With his mask lifted, new whispers came, wondering when Avi had gotten so sizzling, and no wonder he had such a hot boyfriend to match if he'd been hiding such a fit body under oversized jumpers for years.

"Who wouldn't wanna look? Yer stunning." He really was, and every trill of the drums had me rocking my hips another which way and pulling him closer.

Avi stopped hunching, stopped trying to hide, and just looked at me, letting me guide where and how we moved. "You know, if it was just this, just me and the Marc I met in Ethics, no apocalypse, no demons, I don't think I've ever been happier."

"Don't sound so sad about it."

He bit his lip, conflicted but ripe with longing, and I wanted to lick my way between his teeth and prove how much he could like what we were. I knew he did.

"Part of this can be just us," I said. "I told ya, all the things we talked about, all the things I said I liked about ya, all true." It was. No lies. Omissions, yeah, but no lies. "You enchant me, Avi."

I bobbed my head closer, and he tilted his up with a small gasp. Avi slotted against me better than perfect, like no master I'd ever known, sweet and trusting, but still with that danger lurking, a power dark and deadly that he'd barely scratched the surface of wielding.

I wanted to tear into it and let it wash over me, find the king within this petite, deceptive package, and watch him wreak havoc on the world that had dismissed him. I wanted to be the only one to ever know this future powerhouse carnally before he laid waste to everything that offended him and took

and enjoyed everything he'd ever wanted with the abandon of the greatest appetites of Hell.

His lips were shiny from biting them and licking at the indents he'd made. I flicked my tongue up along their crease, and Avi gasped again, inviting my tongue to advance in the space between.

I paused before I could, and Avi snapped his head back, no doubt feeling the same thing. The music had changed again, still seductive and driving, and the other dancers were grinding more heatedly, more than we'd been, by leaps and bounds actually—like seriously getting frisky and moaning as they did so, as if...

“Um, Avi...”

“The next avatar is here.”

“Seems like. And I think it might be one of my cousins.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“You mean...?” Avi looked around at the amorous couples getting more handsy and inappropriate in public with every thrust of their hips to the beat of the song—Eryn and Fry included.

“Definitely Lust, Asmodeus’ avatar.”

“Then where are they?”

“That... is a good question.” I scanned the couples grinding and kissing and nipping at each other’s lips and necks and practically pawing each other’s costumes off. This was getting a bit indecent even for me, but I couldn’t sense the source.

“And why didn’t we feel the tear this time?” Avi was sounding increasingly more agitated, gripping the edge of my tunic with a tight curl of his fingers and turning us in a half dance to keep looking for our guest.

Given illusion was my kind’s specialty, the avatar could be anyone. “Hard to separate one batch of hormones from the—”

“Ah!” A zombie cheerleader seemed to snap out of her stupor after her quarterback boyfriend nipped hard enough at her neck to draw blood. Then she went right back in on him just as viciously, which, in character, but not a good sign.

“You mean we were distracted by being... too turned on?” Avi was clearly not seeing the irony. “I felt Sloth coming from across campus!”

“The tear must have happened here, and we didn’t feel it because we were on top of it. How about we focus on the

finding the baddie part before our friends devour each other.” I nodded at our resident droids.

Eryn and Fry hadn’t quite escalated to the biting stage, but the way they looked at each other in between passionate embraces and fervent dry humps was like they might literally eat each other whole.

More than the dancers were being affected too. Outside our room were couples pushing each other up against walls and finding spots on the floor to grind it out. Didn’t look like Ginger Devil was at the door anymore, probably out enjoying the fun with his own partner.

“Okay... okay.” Avi was trying to stay calm but still hadn’t released his death grip on the swath of my tunic that went over one shoulder. “I can find them, right? Whoever they are? I just need to concentrate—” He went still, words cut off mid ramble, and eyes staring blankly at nothing.

“Avi?”

“Marc?” Avi answered like he no longer saw me and hadn’t heard me call out.

Lust must be feeding him an illusion.

I pried his fingers from me and shook him by the shoulders. “*Avi.*” His eyes had gone wide with terror, flicking left and right as if looking for me.

“Marc!

“Avi!”

The locals were getting dangerously more bitey.

“*Avi!*” I shook him harder. He could beat this. He was the spawn of a bloody arch demon, God damn it!

“It isn’t real,” Avi murmured. “You can put thoughts in my head. It isn’t real! Marc...” he finished with a whimper, and I felt a lurch in my chest I didn’t like one bit. I couldn’t tell where the avatar’s power was coming from. I didn’t know what they were showing him. “I-I don’t... want to see these things. *Please.*”

That lurch again.

Emotions really were terrible when they weren't wanted.

“Marc!”

I gripped either side of Avi's face and made him look at me, even if I knew he couldn't see or hear me. I pushed into his mind, wading through a thick sea of distorted images, a bloody mess of pain mixed with perverse pleasures as awful torture happening to the people here, to Avi's friends, to *me*, which could all become reality if we weren't quick.

I pushed, and I pushed, and I found Avi at the center, huddled on his knees, hugging himself and trying to not look at the orgy of carnage but unable to close his eyes as he sobbed, “Please... make it stop!”

“Avi!” I screamed over and over until, at last, he saw me. I was on my knees in front of him, and I made him see an illusion of the truth outside this nightmare of just me, just us, with my hands holding his face.

Then I kissed him.



MARC'S TONGUE was in my mouth. I'd wanted to feel Marc's tongue in my mouth since I first saw him smirk, and it was there, seeking mine with an intimate plunge.

It was hot and deep and every bit as talented as it had felt the multiple times it had been on my cock. But this was better—almost—because it was both of us exploring and meeting each other's mouths with the same ravenous suction. I forgot the horrors I'd witnessed that I hadn't been able to tell for sure were real or fake, and kissed Marc back until my lungs demanded air.

A wave shot out of me and made me gasp from Marc's lips. The horrors were gone, and everyone on the dance floor,

the *real* dance floor, was hissing and groaning and muttering confusion over why they had gotten so rough.

“Did I...?”

“Nullify an avatar’s power like Sleeping Beauty waking from her nap?”

From Marc’s *kiss*, he meant, which wasn’t wrong.

“Ya did. Good boy, Avi,” he whispered, and I wanted nothing more than to kiss him again, but we had an avatar to find.

“We need to get everyone out.”

“Right.” Marc blinked like he’d been thinking about kissing me again too. “What’s that bollocks excuse always given in cinema for mass hysteria?”

“Gas leak?”

“Gas leak!” Marc shouted above the din of confusion and music playing. “Everybody out before shite really hits the fan!”

Enough revelers were spooked by the scratches and bitemarks and bruises they’d given each other that they bolted immediately. A stampede began, all headed for the same door, while some couples were still snapping to their senses and at risk of getting trampled.

“What the...? This is...? Are you two okay?” Eryn asked, as she and Fry stumbled toward us.

“Weird,” Fry summed up what had happened pretty much perfectly.

“Try to keep the masses from panicking,” I said. “We’ll get the rest out.”

“But—”

“Go!” I pushed them to follow the hoard of fleeing partygoers, not giving them time to question my sudden penchant toward heroics, and hissed at Marc, “Why isn’t the avatar showing themselves?”

“Because it’s far more fun to make us sweat. Come on.” He dragged me out of the dance room. A few people against walls or in corners surfaced from their bitey stupors after I got close, so at least I had that going for me, but if the actual avatar could be anyone in disguise, how was I supposed to find them?

Marc sniffed the air like a bloodhound, as we watched more and more people head for the exit. I told everyone about the gas leak if they still looked confused, and they sobered in an instant. Marc’s nose didn’t seem to be leading us any better than what were supposedly my superior senses, because everyone we passed stayed human and didn’t do anything but run.

“Is that it?” I asked as we circled through the kitchen, no longer finding anyone but stragglers. “There’s no one else?”

Marc still had hold of my hand, sniffing and listening, even though the music hadn’t stopped, playing a Halloween mix that had just switched to “(Don’t Fear) the Reaper.”

Marc snapped his head up the stairs. The second floor!

I prayed the CAS house didn’t have a basement, as Marc hauled me behind him up the staircase.

“Will I know them if I touch them?”

“Probably don’t want to touch them.” Marc glanced back with a wiggle of his free fingers. “Pain and pleasure, remember?”

Coming from Marc’s touch, the idea made my gut hot.

From some stranger who wanted to kill me, less so.

Several couples were up here, and *whoa*, I swear that mermaid had just been about to tear her pirate girlfriend’s ear off before we reached the landing. Everyone we passed came to an abrupt clarity of their senses, and again, we shouted:

“Gas leak! Everybody out!”

They ran and none of them tried to attack me.

Where was this thing?

Room after room, each failure had me clenching Marc's hand tighter. These frat houses weren't big, just renovated homes with a handful of rooms. There couldn't be much more, maybe another few people at most, and then—

Brent.

Brent and his *girlfriend*, who were very heavily petting on a bed, which might have been his bed, and though I did not want Brent—I didn't, damn it—I did not need to see that!

“Out!” I shouted from the doorway, with Marc still turning his head as he sniffed out... arousal? “Gas leak! Come on!”

Nothing happened. They weren't stopping like everyone else. I'd never spoken to Brent's girlfriend before, but I knew her. Kristen Kinney. Tall. Pretty. Dressed I assumed to look like Lois Lane, since Brent was Superman, with her dark hair curled neatly like a 40s starlet, wearing a deep purple blazer and pencil skirt that screamed sexy librarian as much as comic book reporter.

Her jacket was half off, and Brent's super suit, a good replica but probably still cheap from a party store, was loose in front, unzipped from the back, or maybe torn. They were being just as rough as everybody else.

Except... Brent wasn't. He was growing still, eyes fluttering like they were rolling back in his head.

“*Hey!*”

Kristen turned, only I was pretty sure that wasn't Kristen because her eyes blazed red like Marc's, slit and fiery, and her lips were black.

Not painted black, but veiny like poison, with the inside of her mouth entirely black too. The same veiny discoloration was on Brent, as his eyes rolled further, and he started to convulse.

“Stop!” I shot out my hellfire without thinking, barely caring where I aimed, but Lust batted it aside like she was dressed as Wonder Woman and could deflect bullets.

My hellfire sizzled to nothing.

“And I was having so much fun,” she purred, slinking off the bed. She popped her neck, closing her eyes and spreading her arms, like she could still taste the aura of desire she’d evoked. “Not bad, darling. You thwarted quite a bit of my power.” Her eyes flashed open and centered on me. “But you’re no match for an avatar of my level.”

She dropped the jacket from her shoulders, and as she caught it, she twirled it in front of her like a bullfighter tossing his cape, and behind that flourish was her true form waiting.

Not she, but *they* floated, their skin a deep purple, with flowing red hair, black having overtaken the whites of their eyes, though the burning red remained, and their face and body were... more than androgynous, because they were the apex of all aspects of masculine and feminine combined.

I could hardly miss the ample breasts and equally heavy cock that hung beneath the line of a sash hanging from their waist that was little more than a belt. Sloth’s cock hanging from between furry legs had been formidable enough. Did demons not care about—but of course they didn’t, especially not Lust.

They were beautiful and terrible with how their horns, two sets, went from their forehead and swept upward, the other from their temples and swept to the sides. The horns seemed fleshy, with twisted bits of sinew mixed with bone and pulsing like... a *pulse*. The flesh was red and the bone black, with the same twisted material lining their body like protective scales. Some of it curved just beneath their breasts, and their bare nipples were pierced with gold studs.

Like their horns, they had two sets of wings, a larger pair like Marc’s, only where his became featherlike, theirs faded to more fleshy sinew. A second, smaller pair of bat wings extended from their lower back, neither needing to flap to keep them aloft.

Their face and fangs reminded me of Marc’s too, hauntingly handsome and pretty in one, and their black-tipped clawed fingers were adorned with rings, with similar gold accents gilding their horns.

Beautiful. Terrifying and beautiful.

Brent still seized on the bed.

“Marc!” I cried to him, as I let my costume fade and my demon form take shape to replace it. I didn’t know if Marc could do anything to help Brent, but I didn’t want him to die. I had to get Lust away from him.

I shot another hellfire beam, aiming between them and the bed, and they swooped to the left to avoid it.

Marc leapt forward at the opening, airborne with his demon form unleashed, and landed on the bed beside Brent. I hadn’t seen him much from behind, but his tail was classically spade-tipped with ridges all down its shaft. The base started above the low hang of the longer blue loincloth that covered him, revealing part of his backside with how his thighs and legs were left bare.

“Pitiful,” Lust purred—a purr more than a growl, with a doubled voice, both masculine and feminine like how they looked. “So enamored with a lesser creature. I don’t even know that peon’s name, and he is from my court. *Pathetic*,” they added, just like Sloth had called us too.

“Fuck ya right back,” Marc growled and seized Brent by the front of his suit, lurched him upright, and—

Kissed him.

He was *kissing* him, and a spike of hot jealousy ratcheted through me because I’d only kissed Marc for the first time downstairs, and I did not like seeing his lips on Brent. But it made sense. I knew it made sense. Marc was drinking back the poison Lust had fed to him by kissing him again.

A flash of hellfire brought my eyes back to the avatar, as they summoned a ball of power and unleashed it toward Marc. I surged forward a beam of my own that connected with theirs before it struck, the impact causing the table lamp to burst with a rain of purple sparks.

Brent gasped, brought to alertness as much from the explosion as from the last of the black leaving his lips as Marc finished sucking it away. Brent’s eyes bulged so wide, I

thought they might burst from his skull, as he took in Marc's appearance.

"Ya never wanted to seek shelter elsewhere more in yer life, eh, Brenty-boy?" Marc taunted. "Boo."

"The *fuck?*" Brent flew toward the foot of the bed, not even seeing Lust to the right of him, but when he tried to run for the door with me standing in front of it, he definitely saw me—white-haired, horned, winged, with natural armor over my neck and shoulders like teal sinew similar to Lust's red.

"Gas leak," I said in a voice I knew had more rumble than usual but was still recognizably me. "Just a gas leak, Brent. Now run." I stepped aside to give him room to flee, and though his eyes raked down my changed form, he didn't hesitate.

"Remember to dodge!" Marc called, and I turned forward just as Lust flung the remains of the bedside table at my head.

I ducked and it burst into a splintering of wood pieces against the wall.

I sprang up in the aftermath to catch the air with my wings and propelled myself forward—only for Lust to now be my dad looking terrified.

I reared back, trying to shake the vision away.

"Avi!"

Lust was coming in fast once I could see again, and I grabbed whatever parts of them got to me first—their outstretched claws. I spun with a grip on their wrists and flung them through the wall into the next room with a crash of plaster.

I didn't know I could do that!

"All right, Avi!" Marc dropped down beside me after an elegant leap from the bed. He was still so tall next to me with his clawed feet.

"But how do I—"

He grabbed me by the throat and slammed me into the edge of the remains of the wall.

I choked, gasped, clawed at him—only for it not to have happened at all, when I came to with Marc shaking my shoulders.

“I *really* hate that power,” I growled.

“Ya like it when I do it.” He winked.

A flare of red hellfire gave me seconds to react, and I chose to tackle Marc to the floor, not knowing where it might be headed.

The bed burst into flames.

It burned hot and fast and petered out in seconds, but there was still basically no comforter left and now the smell of burnt fibers in the air.

Straddling Marc reminded me that he didn't wear underwear, in either form, and there was definitely nothing between him and me with that loincloth swept aside, other than my speedo thingy that was a little... strained.

I pushed off him despite the smirk on his face and spun to face the hole in the wall with a flap of my wings.

I couldn't see Lust.

Another flare brought my attention left, back toward the door, where Lust had circled around and was firing another bolt—right at Marc, as he got up behind me.

“Marc!” I dove between him and the hellfire, bracing myself for searing pain that might tear a hole right through me.

It singed... but didn't sear, didn't hurt much at all, and when I looked down, beneath the teal neck and shoulder armor was something like a chest plate, corded with the same mix of fleshy muscle and bone, but fading from teal to white down my stomach. Grayish white, the color the rest of my skin had become, only it was as tough as steel and had caused Lust's hellfire to sputter out.

“Maybe you’re more impressive than I thought.” Lust’s voice sounded different now, more masculine than the mix of both. “But you’re still a slave to your human desires.”

As they moved toward me, more of their masculine features took over, as if becoming what I craved most, and their voice kept only the deeper rumble. Like some big brother to Marc with their similarities, Lust lolled his tongue out to lick his lips, but it lolled down lower than a normal tongue should, forked at the end and thick and coiling like a snake.

A shot of pleasure coursed through me before Lust had even touched me, as I felt as much as saw Marc on his knees in front of me sucking my sprung cock. I shook the vision from my mind, because only *Marc* was allowed to send such images to me. Only *he* was allowed to commit those acts.

As distant sirens were heard, the cops or fire department or both having been called, I pitched forward to get my claws on Lust again.

“Wait!” Marc cried, but my momentum was set. I had my hands around Lust’s throat, but he brought his up and clamped them onto my forearms, manly and alluring like I didn’t want to admit, because he looked so much like Marc.

Pain indescribable mixed with pleasure ripped through my body, and I howled, knees buckling beneath me. Lust still had hold of me and lowered me slowly to the floor, right in line with his thick cock. The pain/pleasure tore into me again, like waves of being flayed along my nerve endings, but it hurt so incredibly *good* that my cock swelled.

Lust must have thought it was only terrible for me, because he raised one of his claws to slice across my throat, sneering, “How does that feel, half breed?”

In the seconds before my number was up, caught in a heightened sense of agony/ecstasy, I didn’t care about myself. Only that feeling. Only how much I *liked* it, and I wanted to bathe in Lust’s blood and lick the insides of his skin once I tore it from his bones.

“Avi!”

He swung, and I caught his wrist with a twist out of his hold on me.

“Do it again,” I growled and watched his eyes widen in confusion.

“I got ya, love.” Marc shot two blasts of hellfire at Lust’s shoulders, causing him to stumble away and turn back into *them*.

I stood on shaky legs, my cock so hard it ached, as Marc wrapped around me from behind—not as tall as before, because I was taller, my feet grown into gargoyle-like talons now that raised me two to three inches.

“I got ya so good,” Marc breathed against my ear and everywhere our skin connected brought just as much pain/pleasure into my body as from Lust—*better*, because from Marc, I wanted it.

“Yes,” I moaned.

“Yeah?” He poured more into me, and I wanted to tear my teeth into something right the fuck now.

“Yes!”

I pushed off the floor from Marc’s hold with such force that I heard the wood crack, and larger claws than I’d had before caught the surprised Lust by their throat. I dug in with deep punctures and wrenched the other side of their neck to my waiting mouth.

Their blood tasted like honeyed wine, as I tore into their flesh like biting tender chicken off a drumstick. I wanted more. *More*.

I bit again, latching tighter to where I’d torn their neck open, and drank and drank, not caring that the blood smeared across my face. Lust’s mix of masculine and feminine voices choked, squeaked, and gurgled at my assault, not even able to get out a scream, only one bitten off word.

“H-how...?”

I bit harder, wrenching with my claws, certain that whatever kept their head on their shoulders was but a few bits

of stringy flesh. The flow of their blood was slowing as their heart ceased to beat, and I kept biting and tearing anyway, until I felt their head come off in my hands, and I lapped at the final spurt of blood that fountained up from where it had been. Then I let the remains of Lust drop.

The lust within me, however, was broiling.

I turned to face Marc, letting him marvel at the added changes to my form. Like more of the armor-made skin, teal and white and black in places. My clawed feet and larger taloned hands. My grayish skin, practically white now. My fangs that seemed longer when I tongued them, and I even felt the buds of new horns growing that would soon—very soon—join the rest.

Marc came forward with his chest heaving and tongued his fangs too, devouring me with his eyes like he'd never seen anything more beautiful.

As he should.

I snatched him closer by the back of the neck, and his chest heaved again with a needy gasp, wary of me, maybe even frightened, but wanting me, nonetheless. I wanted him too and let him know it with a lick of the blood from my free hand's fingers while staring into his eyes.

Lust was disintegrating at our feet, their red energy, like Sloth's blue, spiraling up toward me without me even needing to call it. As it filled my body, and Marc absorbed much of it too in a close tangle beside me, our bodies gravitated closer to become flush.

As I gave over to the increased sensation of that life force, I growled with a deeper and more possessive stare into Marc's eyes, so he knew, he *knew* who he belonged to, and I wrenched him in against me for a biting kiss.

CHAPTER NINE

I shared the blood in my mouth through our kiss, passing it to Marc's tongue with long laps and deep probes, and forcing my way down his throat. My tongue was forked now too and could wrap and reach so much farther than a human's.

Marc groaned and grinded against me, still taller, yes, but only slightly now with my feet taloned to match him. I snapped my tail like a whip and coiled it around his waist to keep him against me. Lust's energy was still filling us, and it felt incredible, like that same pain/pleasure mix but better.

Shoving aside the cloth over Marc's cock, I took it in my now larger, clawed hand and stroked, feeling its grooves in my palm. He whimpered and thrust into my hold. *Yes*. I was going to make him come, and then shoot my load across his lips.

I shoved him away from me and pounced to tackle him to the floor, as the last of Lust's energy seeped into our skin, making me want to do nothing but rut. So I did, against Marc's naked cock as I straddled him, my own still strained and trapped within that damn speedo that I tore away with my claws rather than bother willing it to vanish. Marc's wetness mixed with mine as I began to grind our cocks together and growled with a deep, possessive rumble.

"You will never kiss someone else." I wrapped my claws around his throat.

"N-never." Marc nodded despite the tightness of my squeeze.

“You will never touch someone else. Never *fuck* anyone else.”

“N-n-n...” He couldn’t get the word out with how I squeezed harder, so I let up, and he promised again, “Never.”

I surged down to reclaim our kiss with my blood-stained mouth, thrusting and thrusting our cocks to collide and share precome. I could feel Marc’s grooves with every slide, and I wanted to see them. I sat up and thrust down with more force, staring at our connected hips with a lap of my long tongue down along my stained chin. His cockhead had its own thick ridge, and though the shaft tapered the next few inches, deeper grooves started near the base and got thicker, and thicker, all the same beautiful purple shade but turning black at the hardest of its edges.

And his underside, oh, his underside. When I saw it, the special length of vertical ridges like the fringe on a lizard’s tail, I wanted to lap my tongue up along its hollows. I chose to slow my hips and shifted our side-by-side slide to be top to bottom, grinding his cock down against his stomach.

My cock was ridged now too, and the sight of it nearly made me lose my balance. The contrast in texture as I rutted against Marc caused another spike of pain/pleasure with every grind. His line of thin ridges up to a bulbous head dragged along my thick crags. The ring along the widest part of my head was studded, and each layered ridge after the head got wider and deeper in their grooves with their own ring of studs, all leading to a *knot* near my base that seemed to be pulsing. The knot was teal, but most of the rest was grayish white like the base of my new skin, with the ridges also teal and the studded accents black.

I wanted to feel Marc’s ridges inside me, wanted to slam mine with my swollen knot inside him, wanted to claw into his chest and taste the blood from his beating heart, while I shot come all over his insides.

No. Not that. Not with him.

Him I wanted intact even if I made him bleed.

I dragged my claws down his stomach, gentle but still firm enough to leave visible lines, and uncoiled my tail from his waist to find his. I twisted them together like thick strands of rope. Mine was wider than before, fading from black to teal, and ridged now like my cock and the tendons of my wings. The contrast was beautiful against Marc's purple with fin-like spikes all down it and his spaded tip.

His smug grin and wanton reveling beneath me took a pause. With pupils blown so the slits were nearly rounded, his mouth went slack as he whimpered, and nodded, *nodded* with a silent promise to match the spoken one that he would always be mine.

And never touch another again.

I surged down like before, slamming my claws into the floor with another crack of the wood, and kissed him deep, thrusting with such fury that I heard more of the wood crack beneath our hips. Our textured cocks tantalized and scraped with just the right amount of give amidst the firmness of our ridges bumping. The slide was made all the sweeter by how wet we both were.

I still wanted to fuck him, wanted him to fuck me, wanted to ride him, while my tail thrust inside him, *something*, and I pumped down against him with the same vigor as I planned to eventually raw open his hole and catch my knot deep inside him.

Marc's next whimper muffled between our mouths, and I felt the heat of his spunk coat me as he climaxed. I was close too. Right behind him. So close. And in the exact moment when I knew I'd burst, I flapped my wings to lift off him and shot my load on his face.

Hovering above him as I gripped my base, gripped my hot, pulsing knot, one squeeze of its girth shot stripe after stripe over his lips, cheeks, and tongue that he happily lolled out to catch the spillage. He licked it all with a wild whip of his forked tongue, never moving his eyes from mine.

I floated down, sitting on his chest and straddling his face to feed him the remnants and watch him lick me clean. The

way the forked tickle of his tongue felt along the undersides of my ridges was so good I might have come again. I did a little, with a few more spurts shooting down his throat.

He swallowed and sucked me into his mouth to lick me clean all the way to the base of my knot. It didn't look like he could take that too, not as it was now, fat and pulsing. I planned to test that soon. Soon... imagining his lips stretched wide and cheeks filled as I fucked his face.

For now, I pulled my clean cock from his mouth and scooted down his chest. There was still blood on me, and I swiped at it to clean my mouth and chin and licked it from my fingers. While there was still some on my thumb, I ran it through Marc's spunk between us, through some of mine that hadn't spilled close enough to his lips to lick. Then I painted their plump darker shade of purple with a smear of come and blood like rouge.

It was me, and it was him, and it was our victory all in one.

I kissed him again with a lick at his lips before plunging my tongue inside.

Sirens blared, car doors slammed, voices were shouting, several of which could be heard right downstairs—pulling me back to reality with a gasp and ratchet of panic.



WELL THEN.

Hail to the king.

My king.

Who looked a bit disoriented, given there was what sounded like a rescue team of firemen downstairs, with the lawn likely filled with 20-somethings all looking like they'd survived a slasher movie.

So much for an encore.

“What do we do?” Avi sat upright, still very much straddling my chest, with his thick cock coming down from its high. That lovely half-skirt remained in place by a silvery chain and looked lovely framing his hips with the speedo gone and his cock sprung, wet and recently spent.

He started to breath heavily, delicious prick and bulging knot losing their girth, as his features shrank more human. Still a ways to go then but marvelous progress.

“Leave it to me,” I said, patting his thighs. “But ya might want to put yer knickers back on.”

Our rescuers were nearing the second floor, and Avi snapped to enough alertness to get off me and returned to a mere mortal in demon hot pants. I did the same, no more than an innocent angel. Lust had vanished, and though the hole in the wall and the burnt bed would likely raise questions, we didn’t need to answer any—because they didn’t need to see us.

I tugged Avi against me and headed for the door.

“But what do we—”

“Hush. Not that they can hear or see us anymore.” I glanced down at Avi with a wink, leading him to the landing and staircase, where firemen raced up past us without a second glance. “They see what I want them to, remember?”

Avi nodded but didn’t truly relax until we made it out of the house through a side door in the kitchen. He tucked quite nicely against my hip with my head able to rest atop his.

There was enough chaos and looky-loos that I reappeared us right amidst the crowd without anyone noticing. There was indeed a firetruck, police vehicles, and an ambulance parked out front. Most of the partygoers were still around with wide-eyed, confused expressions, along with a few concerned professors and other neighbors from nearby homes on the hill.

Avi spotted Eryn and Fry, both of whom were scanning the crowd for us, I’d wager, and dashed out of my hold to join them. Eryn hugged him fiercely as soon as they met. Stoic Fry hugged him too. When I caught up, Eryn threw her arms

around me just as tightly. It felt rather nice actually, knowing she'd worried, and Fry even gave me a relieved nod.

Then Eryn smacked my chest and pushed out of my arms to smack Avi.

"Don't you dare ever do something like that again! Helping people is one thing, but you should have gotten out sooner with the rest of us. How long were you even in there?"

"Not... long," Avi lied, shrinking from her admittedly gentle smack. "We just got lost in the crowd once we got out. We had to make sure no one was trapped inside."

Like Brenty-boy, who was nearby with his actual girlfriend, though she was dressed the same as Lust's guise. She was ranting on about something he wasn't listening to, because he was staring long and hard at me and Avi, but darted his gaze away when he caught me staring back. He shook his head like dismissing an afterimage.

Good lad. Keep convincing yerself it was a hallucination.

"Seems everything turned out all right," I said and tugged Avi back to me. He tensed, but then leaned into my side.

Bloody, brutal, and insanely hot for just all right, and another avatar was down.

"Oh no..." Eryn said with a hitch in her voice, hand coming up to cover her mouth.

We turned to look, and paramedics were bringing someone out on a stretcher. We'd missed one. They were trying to save him as they hurried him to the ambulance, but he had the same poisoned discoloration around his lips that had almost killed Brent, one of my kind's specialties since it was quite easy to get even our enemies to try a taste. Only for this bloke, the paramedics were too late.

Poor Ginger Devil.

He was dead.



“I KNEW HIM. Neil Jost, the guy who’d been manning the door and collecting cover charges? He was a townie. We went to elementary school together.”

“Didn’t seem like ya were that close.”

“It doesn’t matter. I still knew him. Lust must have gotten to him before we noticed, and it was too late to save him. I *knew* him, Marc, and he’s dead because of me.”

Poor sweet Avi, still too human to know that empathy was a weakness he was better off without. Guilt too. A bad feeling once something was over and done with and couldn’t be changed? What was the point?

I dropped onto my bed, mobile on speaker beside me so I didn’t have to hold it. I was playing human now, so figured I’d need one, and Avi had called me this morning, having said he wanted to be alone after the events at the frat house.

I was expecting a pullback, a full-on retreat. He’d reveled in the blood of his enemy and taken what he’d wanted from his second with a majestic viciousness that had rightly set my loins on fire. Plus, the energy from my tribe’s avatar had tasted about five-thousand times better than Sloth’s.

I sprung a little hellfire into the base of my palm and the new burn was brilliant and more deadly than I’d ever wielded.

All according to plan, so long as Avi didn’t—

“I want to step up our training. I want to know *everything*.”

Oh. Well then. The ordeal had lit a fire under his cute little tush rather than extinguishing it. “All for it, mate. Fantastic. But why are we having this discussion over mobile instead of in person?”

“Because I promised Dad we’d do something today, remember? And he was already so worried after I got home

last night. I'll call you again if I have time for training later. Otherwise, Monday. I need to be prepared for what the next avatar might be capable of. They'll be even stronger because the veil is getting weaker, right?"

"Fraid so." I rolled the ball of hellfire around my hand like David Bowie's crystal in *Labyrinth*. I was lounging in human form in my briefs, 'bout as normal as normal could be other than the magic trick.

"But they're already so much more powerful than..."

I looked at the phone when he hesitated. "Me?"

"I guess there are different levels of demons, right? And you're a lesser one?"

That stung a bit, though I knew he didn't mean it belittlingly. "Technically, I'm an imp, lowest of the low."

"But you tore through those guys that first night."

"Humans, sure, but compared to most demons, I'm pretty paltry." I flared my hellfire brighter, until it nearly reached the ceiling.

A little less paltry now.

"We really have a lot in common, huh?" The earnestness of Avi's admittance made me snuff my fire out.

We did. Always overlooked. Always seen as weak and pathetic. But we were both going to become something greater. I almost wanted to tell him—what I was really planning, how I'd absorbed just a bit more than him from both avatars, and he hadn't noticed.

But that would have been daft. Why would I tell him...

That I planned to leave him.

"I don't know if I like what I'm becoming," Avi said, "but against all my better judgment, I still like you."

Funny how that stirred my loins almost as much as his claws on my throat. "I like ya too, Avi, artistic introvert and demonic dynamo both." That wasn't a lie. It never had been.

I heard him huff a pleased little laugh, which as different as it was from his dominant growl also managed to make my undies tighten. “Where are you anyway?” he asked. “Where do you stay when you’re not with me or at school? Do you have a dorm?”

“I have a flat off campus.” I glanced around my bedroom. Just a single, with bathroom, galley kitchen, living room, and dinette, but it served its purpose when I needed some repose. I also had a map of the town of Vale on the wall with pins pricked in where we’d encountered avatars so far. No strings connected them like some conspiracy board. It was just to keep track. To look for patterns. “Maybe I’ll show ya the place sometime.”

“You didn’t kill anyone to get it, did you?”

“Just a pedophile. I avoid hurting innocents. Not as much fun.”

Avi laughed again but then said, “I don’t know if you’re joking.”

I wasn’t.

“Anyway... talk to you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow. And Avi?”

“Yeah?”

“We can only get better, you and me.”

Another not-lie, because we would get better, just toward different ends. The odd thing was, when I was here, when I was anywhere without Avi, I... missed the bugger.

Emotions really were terrible when they weren’t wanted.

CHAPTER TEN

Besides the guilt from not having saved Neil in time, I think what stuck with me the most over the following days, training whenever Dad wasn't home and I wasn't in class, was that, when I transformed, I now had a knot at the base of my dick.

Not the most mature thing to focus on, I know, but a *knot*? Like a freaking wolf? It was just so primal and strange and kind of awesome when I felt it hanging heavy between my legs, present even when I wasn't erect, though not as bulging. It made me feel an extra zing of power. Me. *I* was powerful for the first time in my life.

Marc didn't have a knot. His dick was its own work of art, believe me, but as he'd pointed out to me more than once, I was supposed to be the master between us, the leader, the king, and I was going to keep growing in power until... I didn't know what.

That part scared me and made it easier to focus on my changed dick rather than the nature of my soul. I'd gotten off on a mix of pain and pleasure so great, I'd asked for more, and used it to fuel my rage and tear Lust's head off with my teeth and bare hands. I'd barely recognized myself then, but in that moment, it had felt like the only me that mattered.

Besides the knot, I'd changed more physically too, growing clawed feet, extra armor, and the start of new horns. How much would I keep changing the more avatars I faced, and I gave in to what I was becoming? What would my final form look like? Would I be something alien and bestial like Sloth, or would I still look human, the way Lust had, the way

Marc did with his handsome face, so pretty and masculine and built to tempt me.

All I'd wanted when Lust's blood had dribbled onto my chin and down my throat was to claim Marc roughly with my claws and cock. How much I'd wanted to rend and rip and *fuck* in equal measure had been... exhilarating.

And scared the ever-living shit out of me too.

They hadn't found evidence of a gas leak at CAS house—since there wasn't one—or anything too strong or psychedelic laced in the drinks, but the corroborating testimonies and unexplained damage to the upstairs still had the verdict coming down as drugs in the water.

I'd worried about them testing the remnants from Lust's poisoned kiss on Neil, but Marc assured me the evidence would vanish before they got the chance. All they'd know was that his bloodstream was poisoned and assume it had been an overdose. Small town forensics didn't always go the extra mile like in TV and movies if the easy answer seemed plausible.

Dad wanted to take time off work, in full-on overprotective mode, but I assured him I was fine, that it was awful and didn't exactly make me excited for any more senior-year parties, but I didn't need to be coddled.

Eryn did plenty of coddling, extra clingy and always asking if I was okay and making me promise over and over that I'd never do anything reckless like staying in a possibly ready to explode building ever again. I felt awful that I was basically lying to her every time I said I wouldn't, because with more avatars coming, who knew how reckless I might have to be.

That Marc had chosen to stay with me while going through the house “saving” everyone only made Eryn and Fry like him more, not having any idea what he really was. What *I* really was. Others who'd been at the party remembered we were the ones who'd snapped them to their senses, and many actually thanked me and took notice of me more on campus. Marc said it was probably because I wasn't wearing my beanie every day anymore.

It was weird not being ignored.

I hadn't seen much of Brent. Whatever he might have wanted to talk to me about at the party seemed less important than avoiding me after seeing me with wings. Even if he believed he'd imagined it, it had to be freaky, especially since Marc always waved whenever we spotted him.

But as much as the guilt and terror were still with me, I knew I was starting to like the new me, to feel more like it was the real me, the only me, even having done such brutal things—like drinking a demon's blood and smearing it, mixed with our come, over Marc's lips to kiss him through it.

The bile that should have stirred whenever I recounted all that never did. I'd liked doing those things. I'd *loved* it. Especially making Marc come and shooting mine across his lips like one of the first visions he ever showed me.

I hadn't given in since, not to his many propositions or to my constant desire to proposition him. I liked him, I really liked him, weird demony parts and all, but I was pretty sure that once we got going again, I'd either shove my knot down his throat or spear him with it, and I didn't know if I could be the old me while also being... that. I didn't know if I'd want to be the old me. I'd felt like someone entirely new and, frankly, *better* when I killed Lust and dominated Marc on Brent's bedroom floor. Being powerful wasn't something I'd ever thought I'd experience, and it was almost as tempting as Marc himself.

Since I couldn't stop the next avatar from coming or the violence I'd need to use to stop them, holding back on the rough sex I craved was about the only thing I could control. Though it was getting increasingly more difficult as the days passed.

It was Wednesday now, a week since my birthday, with me barely having registered anything in classes and calling off work every other day to have more time training, and my want to fuck Marc against every available surface was growing insurmountable. Between that and the fact that no new avatar

had attacked yet, I had two sets of blue balls, and I hated them both.

“What else might Wrath be capable of?”

“Uh... probability? Their tribe can basically cause bad luck.”

“Points to Avi. And none greater than the avatar itself. So, if yer not careful with that one, might trip ya up.” Marc snapped his tail forward to wrap around my leg and yanked, upending me onto my wings. I hissed, even though it didn’t hurt that much—more so my pride.

We were sparring in the backyard again, veiled from prying ears and eyes by Marc’s illusions. It was after five, so the sun was setting, and the evening temperatures had dipped into the 40s all week. No snow yet, and I didn’t feel the cold much anyway, even dressed in nothing more than a speedo, which also did very little to hide the girth of my newly demonic cock. I understood why Marc went with the drop of a loincloth.

We’d gone over the basic possible abilities for all remaining avatars—well, remaining *Sins*, since we technically didn’t know which avatar I was, and who Mom might be, waiting for me to let her through the veil.

Marc summoned two bulky fireballs that he clearly meant to rain down on me like meteors. I’d told him no more scorched grass, and he’d responded, “Deflect them better then.”

I tried, still thinking about Mom and Dad and the end of this and what I even wanted from it, and though batting away fireballs was as simple as the swipe of an arm, that meant they went careening toward my house.

“Shit!”

Marc shot out his arm, just as I leapt to my taloned feet, and his balls of hellfire froze before connecting with any siding or roofing tiles. They suctioned back to his palm, swirling together to form one larger ball like a maelstrom of red and orange lava.

He grinned, raised the new mammoth-sized hellfire bolt over his head, and started to fling it toward me across the lawn.

I caught it, more like half caught, half stopped it from advancing closer with some unknowable power of mental will, but the parts nearest to my palms burned. Like actually hurt and started to sizzle my skin. I pushed back against how much the weight of holding the ball at bay was straining my arms and mind and called on my own hellfire from deep inside me to erupt over my burning hands. It healed the skin, and then spread outward, covering the ball like a dome. It covered and covered it, causing a cooling sensation where the heat from the hellfire had been so strong, and turned the entire thing purplish as my teal engulfed Marc's red.

Huge and pulsing purple, it started to turn more and more teal, with branches of teal veins like a virus drilling toward its core. It was as if my hellfire was feeding on Marc's, empowering itself with it, and when it reached the center, like a cancerous cell overtaking a healthy one, the entire thing burst, fizzling with an implosion that eradicated any sign of purple or red and was just a rain of teal like a lightshow.

"Blimey. S'ppose that counts as a win for ya." Marc propped one hand on his cocked hip. "However—"

"Distracted." I guessed what he'd been about to say. "I know. And I'm sorry. I know I can't afford to get like that, but... is that really what's going to happen?"

"What? Wrath's powers? Well—"

"No. I mean, I was thinking about when we're done with the last avatar, and it's just meant to be me. My mom's going to be there too, right? She's expecting me to do all this? She planned for this? What will she want? Does she want to rule the world after I win? Does she want *me* to rule, and she'd be like an advisor? Will she fight me on wanting to close the veil and return to normal? Does she even... love me? Did she ever love Dad—"

"Avi." Marc came forward to stop my rambling with a firm, supportive clamping of his claws on my shoulders. I

liked the mild scratch, since it was against some of my hardest armor-like skin. “Stop torturing yerself. I honestly can’t guess what yer mum wants. Never met any of the princes, nor their avatars till the couple we’ve knocked off.”

I nodded. I knew he couldn’t answer my questions, but I couldn’t stop thinking them. “I just keep wondering if my dad... knew. About Mom. About me.”

I hadn’t been the best company on Sunday, way too distracted like today, trying to have a nice afternoon and evening with Dad. He’d hugged me after he’d had to get my attention for the fifth time to take my turn in the boardgame we’d been playing. He figured my distance was because of Neil and what happened at CAS house. Which it was, but it was also everything, and part of that everything was wondering if he *knew* and just never told me.

“Maybe he did,” Marc said softly, still grumbly in demon form, which made his voice husky. “Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he really thinks yer mum died instead of just went home. Ya could always ask him.”

Right. Easy if the answer was yes. Not so much if the answer was—*what do you mean you’re half-demon?* “The way he talks about her, it always seemed like they were really in love.”

“Ya think us incapable of love?”

I’d maybe been avoiding looking at Marc, at least directly at him and his gleaming red eyes, but now I met them. He was the most beautiful to me like this. Red hair flowing upward like it was caught in a not-there breeze or underwater, black and gray horns spiraling out of its magnificent coif, fangs peeking out from between his lips due to the gentle smile he was giving me, and claws tilting my chin up. Not as much as he’d needed to tilt it before, since I was taller now, nearer to his face. To his lips.

“I can’t speak to yer mum’s feelings, Avi, why she had ya and left. I don’t know. But I do know that it doesn’t matter which prince spawned ya to know that *you* are something very special.”

I wouldn't have felt the cold around us even if I was human because a flush filled me with a surge of warmth, as his claws continued to hold my chin. "When you say it sweet like that, I almost believe you."

"Ya should," he said like a quiet breath. "I mean it. And we could use a break, yeah? Been running ragged all week, and it's only half over. Yer doing splendidly but being overworked can be just as detrimental as not being prepared. What say we relax a while? Refuel. Regroup." His sweet smile turned more devious. "Reconnect."

The descent was expected. It wasn't the first time since Saturday he'd tried to kiss me again, but it was the first time I had no desire to stop him.

Who'd have thought a demon's lips could be so soft. Like his skin. It was always soft despite the hardness beneath and however impossible it was to break it with anything other than another's demon's claws or hellfire. My hands went straight to his firm, bare chest, claws teasing under the straps of his harness while he slowly pushed his tongue between my teeth and tugged me tight with his other hand around my waist. The hand holding my chin tilted my head to the side and pressed the kiss deeper.

My knot throbbed, like it wanted nothing more than to find a sheath to grow plumper inside and pulse out stripe after stripe of come until the sheer volume oozed out the corners of Marc's lips, or down his thighs from his wrecked hole.

I groaned—*growled*—almost like Marc had pushed that vision into my mind, but I knew it was all me, and flexed my fingers so my claws pierced his skin. He whined. He liked when I did that, when I hurt him a little, and I wanted to carve new grooves into his body that could be savored forever. I wanted to feel that pain/pleasure again and inflict the same on him.

"Ah!" Marc gasped from our kiss, as my claws literally punctured him.

I snapped back, seeing the ten symmetrical imprints I'd made dribbling blood. I wanted to lap at them and sink my

teeth into the ready-made holes.

But I didn't. I didn't, I didn't, I *didn't*.

"I-I-I don't think I—"

"I only wanted a kiss, love." Marc pulled me back with a cradle of one hand behind my head. He traced the other over the holes I'd made in his chest like connect-the-dots, creating a stripe of red in two matching loops. The punctures were already healing but the smear of blood remained as a temptation to lick. "Didn't mean we had to shag. Though I wouldn't be opposed. My kind don't get blue balls, ya see. Straight to indigo." He winked, and my eyes strayed south, imagining the beautiful dark purple of his ridged cock that I could somewhat see the outline of through his loincloth.

My own covering felt far too tight.

I jerked my eyes back up to resist falling into the same mindset of wanting to claim Marc with violence and blood that I still wasn't sure I wanted to be part of me.

"What I was actually thinking," Marc continued, moving the hand around my head to stroke the length of one of my horns and give it a tug, "was that we might try a few human temptations I'm fond of." He winked again, and then turned for the house, shifting back into hot, clothed Englishman as he went.

I paused to register what he'd said before hurrying after him. "Human?"



I DON'T KNOW what I expected, but it wasn't pizza and wings from the place down the road, local beer, and watching the *Tales from the Darkside* movie on my living room sofa.

Marc put the order in, ran to the corner liquor store for a twelve pack, and had already set up the DVD by the time I got out of the shower. He'd said that as demons we were more or

less self-cleaning, which was weird and also kind of cool, but I still liked the feeling of taking a real shower.

“I’ll have to try for myself sometime,” Marc had said, and leered like he meant by joining me.

It was also kind of cool that all I had to do was quickly change into my demon form and back again, and my hair was perfect, dry and with that awesome swept-back look I was starting to love. I thought I had a little more muscle now too, even when I was human, better sculpted and toned and making me almost want to show it off.

I’d still opted for sweatpants and a black Dio T-shirt that originally belonged to my dad. Marc had also reminded me that technically I never needed real clothes. He didn’t wear any, other than the angel costume. He always manifested what he wanted. I hadn’t tried that yet, other than vanishing what I was wearing and reforming it when I changed back to human. It felt too weird to be naked and only wearing an illusion of clothes.

Which meant Marc was basically naked pretty much all the time.

Or did it mean he was always wearing that harness and loincloth?

An eerie violin stinger playing from the DVD screen brought my eyes up as I entered the living room. I’d been up in my head imagining what Marc really wore at any given time, if anything, and found the breathtakingly gorgeous human version of him sitting on the armrest of my sofa with his feet on the end cushion. He’d manifested a T-shirt and sweats too. It was a tight T-shirt, dark burgundy, which brought out the red in his auburn hair.

He was also holding my sketchpad, looking at the drawing of him.

“Hey!” I raced over to snatch the pad away from him, but he lifted it out of reach as I lunged over the back of the sofa. “Gimme that! I didn’t say you could go into my room!”

“I’ve been in yer room.”

“Not without me!”

Marc chewed his lip, continuing to thwart me with his long arm keeping the pad suspended.

“You *have*? Oh, just gimme that!”

“I wanted to see it again.” He yielded finally and handed the pad over. “Saw it on yer bureau and didn’t think a peek would warrant the firing squad. I’d already seen it before, remember? Didn’t have all the extra bits though. I like what ya added. Looks even more like me now.”

I felt my face flush as I clutched the pad to my chest, and then held it in front of me to look at it myself. I’d been adding small details bit by bit over the past few days. The specific grooves of his horns and extra shading. The way his eyes weren’t solid red but interspersed with orange like actual flames. The spurs at the top of the curves of his wings like hooks. The way my favorite grooves along his purplish skin, whether scarification or natural markings, interwove like winding ribbons down his sides, framing the muscles of his taut stomach.

The drawing was from the waist up with Marc’s wings tucked in to fit as much of them as I could, all black and white and grays, but the nuances of shading made him practically come to life off the page.

While the real him was grinning at me for how I’d started to hover my fingers over his stomach muscles, just high enough to not actually smudge the graphite. I flipped the sketchpad closed, but before putting it back in my room, I said, “I’m glad you like it.”

When Marc’s smile turned sweet, I could almost forget he was a demon.

I should have been working on more variety for an eventual portfolio. I didn’t have time to take on commissions, but I needed to create examples of my versatility for future clients someday. Drawing the same gorgeous specimen of demonic beefcake over and over would only appeal to a specific clientele.

It was getting late, way later than I usually ate dinner, but I didn't find myself hungry in the normal sense these days. I still liked to eat, and the smell of melted cheese and gyro meat when I came back from my room absolutely made my mouth water. Basil's Pizza Palace had the best Greek pizza, with spinach, feta, and bacon. I always added gyro meat, and their spicy dry-rub wings were the real deal, usually hot enough to make my face sweat, requiring healthy globs of thick blue cheese.

Marc had all the containers open on the coffee table, a beer ready for me, and hit play on the movie the second I plopped down beside him. I'd watched *Tales from the Darkside* before, the old TV show and the movie, and so had Marc, the movie being one of his favorite anthologies, he'd said. It was my favorite too.

The framing device to tell the different shorts was of a witch planning to eat a very young Matthew Lawrence, who was reading out of an evil fairy tale book to distract her. I'd always loved/hated the last short the most, because it was a love story but a tragic one, and I'd wished it could have had a happy ending.

About an unknowing human falling in love with a disguised gargoyle with claws and wings and deadly secrets.

Like my parents, I guess.

And me and Marc, though I had claws and wings some of the time too.

And I didn't *love* Marc. I still barely knew him, but I was starting to accept that it was impossible not to like him.

"Ah yes, I forgot ya were in this movie." Marc elbowed me as the first short opened on a petite blond college student.

"Ha, ha," I droned. Though to be honest, I didn't mind being compared to Christian Slater. The whole movie was star-studded, even with a lesser known at the time Julianne Moore.

Marc folded his pizza and opened his mouth wide whenever he took a bite, even managing to make that look lewd, eyes twinkling as he gave me heavily hooded bedroom

eyes when he swallowed. At least eating the wings just left his lips greasy. I smashed a napkin across his face when he tried to lick that lewdly too, but I maybe snuggled a little closer to him afterward.

“Who’s more in the wrong then?” Marc asked, playfully arguing with me over the ending of the first short as it shifted back to the framing device. We were picking at the leftovers now and onto our second beers. “The bloke who looks the other way when his best mate and sister screw over his other mate? Or the mate who wants revenge for being screwed over in the first place?”

“I know the movie seems like we’re supposed to root for Steve Buscemi’s character, because he was wronged first, but it’s so extreme—raising a mummy from the dead to mummify your enemies? Plus, in the end, he’s going after Christian Slater! I don’t like seeing him lose.”

Marc opened his mouth.

“And not because I look like him! His character was just taking vengeance for his sister and best friend, even if they were jerks. And he let Buscemi’s character live. Buscemi could have left him alone after that.”

“Ah, I see.” Marc clunked his beer can against mine, slumped a little lower on the sofa, with our shoulders touching. “Slater chose the high road, so he should get spared?”

“Well, yeah. He could have killed Buscemi, but he didn’t. Doesn’t the high road get you anything?”

“Killed, usually.”

I smacked him, but then snuggled back against him as we continued to watch.

The second short was my least favorite, and while Marc seemed riveted by the ominous black cat killing off rich assholes—a more justifiable vengeance story, at least—I was more riveted by him. All this, right now, was so normal. Marc seemed normal, looked normal, we were talking about and enjoying normal things, for horror fans anyway. But then I

couldn't help picturing where he came from, because that wasn't normal at all.

He was literally from Hell, born in Hell, and had never been here before, aside from a version like the Upside Down to spy on us like a voyeur.

"Somethin' on my face?" he asked before turning his head to prove he'd known I was staring. "More grease in need of attention?"

I huffed but still had to ask, "What's Hell like?"

His smirk fell, and he turned to me more centered. "I told ya a little. A lot like this world, just not as friendly. Not exactly the *Hellraiser* version. Well, some of it is. More like... Vegas meets Amsterdam meets the Mines of Moria with an occasional medieval slave market. Make it always nighttime, and yer home."

"That sounds awful. Why would I want to take over a place like that?"

"For the depravity?"

"I can get that here."

"Now ya can." Marc slid a hand over my knee, and the immediate twitch of my cock that he always evoked took a backseat to another burning question.

"What about Heaven?"

The sly seducer act dropped. It was always strange when his face went contemplative, but I still liked it, the smoother prettiness, like he wasn't always deviousness and innuendo. "Don't know. In Hell, when looking through the veil, we can see ya, see this world, even if we can't come through to interact, other than for possessions. We can see spirits too."

I looked around like I might spot one.

"I can't see them now." He chuckled. "Well, maybe a more powerful demon could, so be on the lookout, but mostly... we see them pass on to somewhere we can't follow, like they're fading away but not into nothing. Might be to Heaven. Maybe Purgatory. Maybe somewhere else. But if a dark and devious

and devilishly handsome bloke like me can be birthed from the human mind, why not the good parts? Might be some very good and very *boring* angels out there.”

I laughed, turning in toward him, and our foreheads collided with a gentle bonk. “Sometimes I forget what you are, what *we* are, and this feels... real.”

“It is real, Avi,” Marc said, making my insides quiver. “So I like a little blood-play and laying waste to my enemies before a good rutting? You do too. Is that so wrong when our enemies deserve it? When *we* deserve it and have earned enjoying ourselves?”

“I also like a good dark piece of cinema.” He gestured at the TV. “I like that the kiddo wins in the end against the witch. I like pizza and spice and the way blue cheese reminds me of...” He paused to lick his lips again. “Other things.”

I snorted.

But he pulled my attention back with that same grip on my chin that I enjoyed whether with soft fingers or the prick of claws. “And,” he said gently, “I like you.”

With the lights dim and only the sounds of the movie playing, just the two of us having a dine-in date, I believed he meant that.

But when he tried to kiss me, I pulled back.

“I know you like the idea of me being this... king, but I don’t know if I like that side of me, at least not all of it, not when it gets out of hand.”

“Out of hand? Like defending yerself? Or enjoying yerself?”

“Like hurting you.”

Marc smiled especially sweetly then. “If ya hadn’t noticed, Avi, I kinda like it when ya do that. And you like it too.”

A surge of the pain/pleasure he’d infused in me during the fight with Lust raced through my bloodstream, and I swear it brought me to half-mast in a heartbeat. “B-but... that’s not too much, it’s... it’s...”

“Just right?” Marc teased like a parody of *Goldilocks*.

“What if it stops being just right and gets bloody without the good parts?”

“Are ya asking for a safe word, Avriel?” Marc saying my full name brought the other half of my cock to attention.

Then it made me think. “That’s it. Our real names. If either of us ever goes further than the other wants, we use our real names, okay?”

He stared at me, totally blank, something I’d never seen from him before.

“What?”

“Nothin’, just... none of my other masters ever cared about going too far. Or about me. Or about anything other than themselves really.”

“Not painting the best picture of demons,” I snorted again.

“Well, we’re still more human than ya might think. We just have more id. Less care about consequences. Less inhibitions.”

“Larger libidos?” I guessed where he was going.

“To name some of the benefits.”

I laughed and took note of how his fingers had never left my chin. His thumb smoothed along my jawline, and I shivered. My cock was heavy and hard in my sweats, and it would be equally as easy to will it away and keep watching the movie as it was to give in.

So, I let Marc kiss me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Avi tasted like the rich meats and tangy cheeses we'd devoured, with just the right burn of spice. Not real burn, mind ya—I am a demon—but the tingle was there, urging me to spiral my tongue around his lips, and then deeper inside the crevice of his mouth.

I pulled away to set our beer cans on the coffee table and heaved back with a grip on Avi's T-shirt, pulling him against me. I didn't want him to retreat again, to deny himself, or me, like he had been for days.

Indigo balls were bloody well right, and I knew he wanted this too.

He proved it by pouncing forward and knocking me flat. A quick adjustment, and I was properly sprawled with my little king on top of my hips, grinding through our sweatpants while pressing into the kiss. Avi liked this position, pinning me to stake his claim, and I'd make it so good for him, however he wanted to dishevel me this time 'round.

I wedged my hand between us to tug at my sweats, much as I could have vanished them. The struggle was half the fun, and I hooked my pinky in Avi's to pull his down too, dragging against the resistance of our met hips. He canted up just enough that both our cocks popped free with a clash.

Avi groaned and started grinding harder, kissing harder, while the heat built, and we both flooded with blood to plump us thick.

Almost like surround sound, I heard moaning and wet noises and the slam of a body onto a hard surface from my

right. James Remar was fucking his gargoyle girlfriend in the film, but while I did find the man attractive, Slater was more the wreckable type for me.

“Wait.” Avi held off from the welcome slap of our cocks, lips wet and reddened, and eyes demon slit, like I knew mine were too. “I don’t want to do that again. Not *just* that.” The husk to his amendment made my briefly declined hopes soar.

“Then what do you want?” I swept back a tuft of blond hair that had fallen over his forehead.

“I don’t know if I can say it.” He sat up to shimmy out of the tangle of his sweats. His black T-shirt hanging to just where his cock sprang up was a delectable image I was not about to protest. Then he started pulling my sweats down too, chucked them aside, and ran his hands up beneath my T-shirt until it hitched enough to barely cover my nipples. “But I do know I want you to stay like this, mostly human, just to start, okay?”

Like Avi, I’d only let my eyes, the peek of fangs, and an extra sharpness to my nails bleed through, but I could keep it that way if he wished it. “At yer service,” I said.

Avi grinned. Sweet, resistant-king Avi *grinned*, as if to answer—no.

At *mine*.

And dove between my thighs to swallow my uncut cock like a pro.

Fuck! He wanted to christen his skills on a human prick. Understood. Mine was uncut only in human form, mind ya. As demons, we’re different in the way of anatomy but still fit the gamut of human potential, just with added ridges, other textures, and girthier bits like Avi’s knot. A royal sign, to be sure. Only princes had ’em, like marks of being alpha over us lessers.

I might be a tad jealous.

I could picture it too, even if he didn’t have the knot when he was human, the way it had pulsed when he’d squeezed it to

release over my lips. The way it had stretched my mouth with the barest press of it when he fed me his cock.

Now, Avi was eating mine, which was already hard enough to lengthen out of its sheath, and he tugged on the foreskin to get at more of it like he'd handle one like mine his whole life.

I hissed when he scraped his fangs down the shaft.

Then moaned when he did it again with purpose.

“Now... start to change,” Avi ordered, pausing to lick up my fleshy underside, “so I can taste your ridges too.”

“Yes, sir.”

For my wings to spill over the back of the sofa, I had to shift upward against the armrest, but changing forms was like shedding a layer of clothing. My T-shirt vanished, as did my sweats on the floor. The human me was still me, but when I let go of all illusion, I felt nestled in a type of comfort no clothing or guises allowed.

Avi gazed at my ridged cock with a hungry heave, only to frown when he saw the chain around my waist and my loincloth swept aside. He reached up to tug on part of my harness, and the simple act like a master bringing a pet to heel made my cock throb.

“Lose the coverings. All of them.”

Our Hell garments were part of us, in a way, almost skin, armor, and adornment in one. But I could obey, and when I did, I was naked, truly unfettered, like I'd cast off chains I hadn't realized I'd carried with me from Hell.

Avi was mostly human as he continued to blow me, cheeks hollowed and swirling his tongue around the grooves lining my cock, and the fin-like ridges up my underside. His pretty mouth had to open so very wide to get past the cap of my head, then wider down the base to swallow me. He did swallow, and swallow, and with each bob of me down his throat, I felt his fangs catch on another edge.

I wanted a picture of how we must look like this, so Avi could draw it later—him almost human and me like the

gargoyle in the film. Far prettier of course. No one had drawn me before or captured me so perfectly, like Avi saw things I didn't, paid attention to things I took for granted.

And sucked cock like he came from my tribe when we'd already counted lust out.

He sucked harder, gripping my naked thighs along the ridges there too. I was close, as the fork of his tongue formed and teased into my slit. He hummed like he was loving every taste of me—as he should, thanks, I'm delicious—and raised his head with a pop off my prick.

His eyes were hazy, lips shimmering with precome, as he raked his gaze up my chest, followed by a worshipful caress of his hands, and moved to sit above the spring of my cock.

My mouth dropped open when he raised his hips to slide my shaft along his crease, keeping upright to grind again, and again, and then lifting his T-shirt over his head with a wanton roll of his body as he did it *again*. His armor had knitted over his shoulders and down his chest by the time the fabric went flying. Unlike my harness and coverings, this was part of him, and I wondered if he could feel my touch the same as on bare skin.

I ran my hands up the grayish-white boning, like a corset around Avi's waist, and he whined, grabbing my hands to guide them higher. Feel it, he did. At his pecs, the color brightened to teal, cording with bone and flesh into darker teal and black, all up his neck and down the curves of his shoulders. He brought my hands there and then let me drag them back down with a scrape of my claws.

There was more, somehow more armor forming as he rocked against my cock, down the backs of his arms like hardened scales. His wings sprouted with a sudden whoosh that made my breath catch. They were larger too and had spurs like mine, white where they formed out of the black tendons, but not only at the crest. They went all down the edges, until at the very tips of Avi's wings, the spikes were large enough to skewer.

His knot dropped onto my stomach with a fat flop as his cock shifted with the rest of him. I salivated at its hot slide up my stomach, so much so that I had to lick my lips of the drool that still tasted like pizza and spices and *Avi*.

The layers of his cock to his knot were more deeply grooved than mine. I stroked him, letting my claws scratch at the studs and tease around the furrows. Pumping him in earnest took both hands, one to stroke the shaft, and the other to massage and squeeze his throbbing knot. I wanted each crest and that final bulge to impale my insides until I shouted for reprieve.

“Ah!” *Avi* moaned, still up on his knees to keep lifted enough to rock on my cock, but that last thrust caused my head to pop up into his pucker.

He chased it, sliding along my dripping length, forward and back, and forward again until my tip breached inside him once more.

Then *again*.

I stroked him slower, fondling his knot rather than squeezing it, not wanting either of us to finish yet when the dip inside *Avi* was going deeper each time, and he kept going back for more.

Avi growled on the next brief penetration, and his slack mouth showed a new pair of fangs forming beside his eyeteeth, and new horns grew from the nubs above his forehead. They curved upward and under like ram horns, coiling overtop his original with the same black and teal coloring, almost woven together, the first pointing skyward while the new pair pointed south, like a sharply jagged H.

Beautiful. His white skin, his bright eyes, his new acceptance of the king he'd become manifesting from the poke of my prick and my claws on his knot.

Deeper. A little deeper. Just a little deeper and the cap of my cockhead would finally—

“A tear.” *Avi* froze. “The next avatar’s coming.”

Bloody fuckers!

“I can feel it.” He started in again, sliding along my cock and taking in my tip. “It’s close. The backyard. I can almost see it.” He stared at the ceiling more than toward the kitchen or backyard, but I believed him.

“That’s... good, yeah?” If he wasn’t stopping, I wasn’t about to, and kept stroking him and playing with his knot. “It’ll come for us... not bother with any civilians.”

“Exactly.” Avi slowed, and slowed, and ended his last roll with my tip poised beneath his bud. His eyes shimmered, and I think his fangs and wings grew larger still, as he said, “Let it come,” and slammed down onto my cock.

I howled, and Avi howled in harmonized ecstasy, as his insides tightened around my prick like a vise. This wasn’t the first time one of my masters wanted my cock, but it was rare. Usually, they wanted to claim, to ruin, to dominate, and in all fairness, Avi was doing plenty of all three.

“Yes!” He rocked in earnest before I’d had time to catch my breath. “Fuck me! I want you to fuck me!”

Hell yes.

The static in the air changed as the veil breached. I felt it, stronger than I had with the others, and had to remind myself that I was stronger too. We hadn’t felt Lust at all, and we’d been in the same damn house, but we were a force now, Avi and me. Even my features might change and multiply, and I not so secretly pined for a knot, but I’d take what I could get.

Like gripping Avi’s sweet hips and ramming up inside him with all the strength and lustful wanting I wouldn’t have dared break him in with if he was human.

“Yes!” Avi keened, roaring with a flex of his wings. His eagerness for training had been marred by hesitation to embrace how he’d changed, but no longer—my demon king had reignited.

The back door busted open.

We’d fix it later.

“I can feel your ridges inside me...” Avi ran his claws over his skin-like corset.

Those insides felt incredible, almost too hot and wonderfully tight.

A growl rumbled from the office doorway, followed by the skittering of what sounded like several pairs of feet.

“Company.” Avi barely glanced up, riding me harder.

“What’s it look like?”

“Uh... humanoid spider? Eight limbs. Upside-down head. Mouth filled with... teeth.” He moaned, and I moaned in echo, before answering:

“Gluttony.”

“But why isn’t it—”

“Blubbery?” I panted, huffed, grunted, because Avi’s hole was squeezing my prick in little intervals like hand strokes. “Cause... true gluttony... has nothing to do with waistlines. It’s consuming and never being satisfied.”

I wrenched his head down to kiss him, imparting that he satisfied me plenty, yet I knew I’d never be sated enough without wanting more.

“You *dare*—”

“Ahhhh!” Avi’s cry tore him from our kiss, cutting off the avatar’s threat, as ribbons of come reached my lips with how I squeezed Avi’s knot to milk him through his release—the knot I hadn’t tasted yet or had impale me, but I’d be damned if that didn’t happen soon.

I fucked one last sharp thrust into Avi’s clenching muscles and spilled inside him with a shudder, as Gluttony roared and skittered toward us with what sounded like frightening speed.

Avi flapped off me, still leaking come, and launched himself over the sofa out of sight. I thrust upward to take flight as well, spinning midair, just as come-stained and hard, to see Avi grab two or three of Gluttony’s spider-like legs, and try flipping it onto its back.

Spider was right, a deep indigo-black in color, though the upside-down head was more like it had a full naked man fused onto its thorax, lying upside down. The head hung over the front of it as its main head, with everything in its face carved out but a maw of teeth.

A maw in mid-lunge at Avi that he had to roll out of the way of and release its legs to avoid being bitten—and obliterated if he remembered what this avatar’s consumption was capable of!

“Blast it!” I cried.

“What if I misfire and damage the house?”

Oh, sweet silly bugger.

I flapped out of reach of a leg that lunged at me, which wasn’t easy given the not so high ceilings, and nearly caught my own leg on the back of the sofa.

“We’ve been watching you, imp.” Gluttony’s teeth chattered at me, though the mouth didn’t move when it spoke. “We know what you hunger for. More and more and *more!*” It lunged forward another leg, and another, forcing me back toward the foyer near Avi’s bedroom to avoid being snatched.

They knew. I figured other demons would notice eventually, but they knew.

They knew I wasn’t doing this for Avi.

“Marc!”

It swiped at me with a long shot from over the sofa and would have taken out the TV, several lamps, and who knew what else to reach me, only for Avi to dive onto that leg and swing like bloody Tarzan to change its trajectory, which tossed him—right into me.

We slammed back into the front door with an oof.

“We can fix the house!” I growled at him. “We can’t fix evisceration!”

“I know!” Avi growled back adorably, his frustration making him unfairly cute for a larger and more matured

version of his demon form.

And taller, quite a bit taller when we stood, and I noticed his height had almost caught up to mine with how massive his taloned feet were now and the general increase in size of him.

And his cock.

And his *knot*.

“Uh...” Avi was frantically looking around for something he deemed expendable as Gluttony scrambled toward us, and eventually grabbed the nearby coat rack and chucked it like a javelin at Gluttony’s face.

“Avi!”

Which it suctioned into its mouth with a disturbing unhinging of its jaw that then vanished like being lost in a blackhole.

“*What* can Gluttony do?” I reminded him.

“Eat anything. Wait!” he cried anew when the next swipe of incoming limbs came close to knocking a portrait of him and his father off the wall, and he shot forward his first blast of hellfire—about the size of a matchstick strike that only caused Gluttony’s leg to recoil like a burn from a stove.

It tried to leap forward on its many legs to reach us, but Avi leapt first, getting onto its back and slashing with his claws. Better. Didn’t paint the prettiest picture, given he was atop the wraith-like naked man portion of Gluttony while gloriously naked himself still, but he was trying to reach the head like he had with the others.

Only for two of the hind legs to grab Avi and fling him backward into the kitchen, his shoulder hitting the side of the cabinets as he went.

“Pitiful! Pitiful!” Gluttony cried.

At least it hadn’t called us—

“Pathetic!”

Fuckers.

“We can’t keep playing defense forever, Avi, not with all those limbs!”

“Right...” I heard him groan as he leapt up from the kitchen floor. Then again, more excitedly, “Right! Marc, get underneath it!”

“What?”

“Meet me in the middle and grab as many legs as you can!”

“Fools!” Gluttony squared off between us, ready with each half of its limbs to snatch up either of us should we come closer. “You’ll only be my next meal.”

“Then eat me, Charlotte,” I snarled, and Avi and I both raced from either ends of the house, diving between swipes of its legs, and grabbing onto the ones we could as we went. We slid on the backs of our wings just beneath it and collided shoulders with a thump.

Teetering from the loss of balance with several of its legs tucked underneath it, Gluttony still swung its head and gaping maw down toward us, ready to suction every part of us into oblivion, which was not the next manner in which I’d wanted to be sucked.

“Now! Thrust its legs up as high as you can!” Avi cried.

I obeyed, not knowing what he had planned, until Gluttony started to consume—and vacuumed its own legs into its maw before it had the chance to gobble either of us, sucking itself inside out with a pop like an implosion.

A spray of blood erupted over us that, before it landed, became a mist of indigo-black sparkles, and the legs that hadn’t been eaten were snapped off during the inversion and faded to nothing with the rest. Avi laughed and reached one hand up to summon an elegant swirl of Gluttony’s essence with a shiver.

He was brilliant. Magnificent. Beautiful.

And I was planning to leave him when this was over.

“Don’t you want any?” Avi asked, as more and more of Gluttony’s power filled him, and I hadn’t yet reached for my own. “Every taste of it makes me want more.”

“That’s Gluttony for ya,” I said.

Avi swirled some of the essence around his hand like cotton candy without absorbing it and basically fed it to me, passing the energy to me to share, never doubting my loyalty but wanting me to be part of this with him.

Those pesky *emotions* twisted in my gut, as I took it in and felt the strength of it empower me, noticing the first of my own physical changes—armor, like Avi’s, which built itself over my stomach and chest from my own skin and sinew.

I was otherwise very much naked.

No knot yet either.

Avi kissed me, gentler than after Lust, but still hungry. He was more at peace with his nature now, given over to it more. The lines between who he was and who he’d become were growing blurred, and the hunger in his gaze when he broke our kiss made him look like he could eat the world.

He could.

He *would*.

And I was going to take the scraps for myself.

That was the plan. That had always been the plan.

Avi chuckled and licked up my lips. Then he lurched upright to stand finally and helped me stand as well. He *was* taller, but I felt taller too. Emboldened. Powerful.

Conflicted.

“We’re going to have some cleaning to do before my dad sees this,” Avi said with a glance around the living room, not to mention the mess of the door we’d heard splinter. “But before that...” He faced me with what should have been a welcome leer and stroked his claws down my face. “I want you to fuck me again.”

“Right now?”

“Right now. Then after we clean up, we’re going to finish the rest of that pizza and wings, because I am starving.”

I laughed, but I could hear the hollow ring to it.

As the last of Gluttony’s energy faded between us, I’d still taken more than Avi by the end, and again, he hadn’t noticed. But I had to stick to the plan, didn’t I? To be my own master finally. Much as I’d sometimes enjoyed serving, there were too many times I hadn’t, each master always eventually *worse*. I’d earned my reward, my destiny, doe-eyed demon king be damned. I deserved it.

Even if Avi was so much more than I’d ever dreamed.

“How could I say no?” I said and scooped him into my arms, new horns, armor, wings, and all, to carry him to his bedroom—while the gargoyle in the movie we’d neglected tore her lover apart.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sex—while I know not for everyone, but at least for me—totally not overrated.

I might be addicted to it.

Over the past week since Gluttony, Marc and I had done it daily, sometimes more, in every position we could think of, though always with him fucking me. I wanted to flip the tables eventually, and Marc had said many times how much he wanted my knot, but I was nervous. It was different having to be the one in control.

I knew I could do it. As a demon, being breached for the first time hadn't been difficult at all but had burned just right and filled me, literally and figuratively, with such indescribable bliss, I thought about it whenever Marc wasn't in me.

So, if that was easier than it would have been as a mere human, being the one to *breach* should be easy too, right? I did like the idea of making Marc whimper, like I had after we defeated Lust, and what he always drew out of me.

I was also anxious to sink my claws into something again, and that made me more hesitant to be the one doing the fucking, even if we did have safe words now. I wanted the next fight and was even looking forward to it. I wanted the thrill, the satisfaction of outsmarting or outmaneuvering something powerful, like defeating an epic boss in a video game, but right in my own backyard—which had basically happened.

That part I didn't mind so much. The avatars *were* trying to kill me, so I had a right to defend myself and enjoy defeating them. But every once in a while, when my pulse ran hot, whether from anger or hormones, I wanted to sink my teeth into something and relish in the bloodshed of rending open arteries and veins, and that still scared me.

It had been a week, more than a week since Gluttony, and still no sign of the next avatar. Marc said they wouldn't necessarily be evenly spaced, but I was restless.

The sex helped.

So did the ease of using my powers, no longer worrying my horns would burst from my skull without warning.

Maybe a Henley today?

Hoodie and bomber jacket?

Pullover and scarf?

Jean jacket and striped sweater?

That. Definitely that.

Each time I thought something new, standing in front of my bedroom mirror, my outfit changed like reforming liquid from one to the next. I felt like Mystique from X-Men, or T-1000, or when Peter Parker first had the Venom symbiote with the black Spider-Man suit and could mold it into other clothes too.

I *was* trying to stop the apocalypse, right? Stop it? That basically made me a superhero. I could even fly! And burn my enemies to a crisp. Or turn them inside out. A little less heroic maybe but definitely necessary.

I made the sweater a little tighter, so when I took off my jacket, there'd be no mistaking I wasn't trying to hide in something oversized again. I was still small, and I'd always be petite in human form, but I wasn't minding that so much anymore. Marc couldn't rest his chin on my head as easily if I wasn't shorter than him.

I ran my hand through my hair. I looked pretty damn good.

“You home?” Dad rapped on my door, waiting for my answer before he peeked inside, since he’d maybe found Marc a couple times when he didn’t. Not naked, thank God! But I didn’t think there was any confusion about our “sleeping” arrangements some nights.

“I’m here! You can come in. I’m surprised you’re up.” I backed away from the mirror so Dad could open the door.

His usually flattened blond hair with its smattering of grays was a bed-head tangle. Even his reddish beard had a few mashed hairs sticking out in places, as he blinked bleary green eyes. He was in sweats and a T-shirt, clearly having just rolled out of bed. I was impressed though by how much lift his hair got when it wasn’t under a hat.

“Don’t think I don’t feel like a zombie.” Dad chuckled with a rustle of a hand through said tangles, as he leaned against the doorjamb. “But lately, I barely get to see you with this darn night shift and you being so busy. I wanted to talk to you about a few things before you left for class today.”

Uh oh. “Sure. What about?”

Dad motioned me toward my bed and the sinking feeling that had started to form deepened to quicksand sucking me into its void. I went over to sit, but rather than sit beside me, Dad started pacing, which was never a good sign. “Let me start by saying... I’m not mad.”

Fuck.

“*But* Henry might have given me a call earlier this week, wondering why you’ve been cutting back on shifts so much at Ole’s.”

Henry being Henry Olafsson, my boss, who of course my dad knew, because most people knew everyone in this town. “Dad—”

“I get it. Who wants to miss out on time with friends and... significant others their senior year of college. I just know how worried you were about making enough to finish off tuition, especially if you need summer classes. But now you’ve been

cutting back to have more time with someone new in your life.”

I was glad we’d had “the talk” years ago, even if I wouldn’t have truly needn’t it until now, because this felt a lot like that, and if he brought up sex on top of this, I might combust. “Dad, I’m sorry, and I’ll apologize to Mr. Olafsson, it’s just—”

“*It’s,*” he talked over me again, but not to chide me or to fully don his disappointed dad look, but to stop in front of me with a sudden smile and pull a long rectangular piece of paper out of his pocket, “a good thing you don’t need to go back to that job if you don’t want to.”

“What?”

He handed me the paper. Not just paper, but a check—for several thousand dollars. “The house was paid off a while ago, so I’ve been pinching and saving every way I could the past several months to make sure I could surprise you with the rest of your year’s tuition. With a little left over if you need to stay for the summer.”

I couldn’t believe it. I just kept staring at the numbers.

“You can keep working if you want. I know Henry would appreciate it. But no hard feelings if you don’t. I already talked to him. I know you have your own little nest egg, and now you don’t have to use it on school. I was going to wait until Thanksgiving, or even Christmas to give it to you, but you seem like you’re ready now to keep enjoying your senior year.”

“Dad, I... I am so grateful, but I told you—”

“That you didn’t want me spending my retirement on you.” He sat beside me now and wrapped an arm around me to hug me against him. “You wanted to earn as much on your own as you could. I know. And I am so proud of you for that. But this was extra from not needing the house payment anymore. I figured it counted as a loophole.” He smiled wider, creating a crinkle at the corners of his eyes, so loving and incredible, that I launched at him and wrapped my arms

around his neck with more force than I probably should have. “Oof! Don’t knock the wind out of me now!”

I laughed and nuzzled my face in his shoulder. “Thank you.” I pulled back to stare at the check again that I reverently folded to put in my pocket. I could drop it off at the Business Office today and not have to worry about the end of semester cutoff or other deadlines ever again.

“This is new.” Dad tugged on the corner of the jacket I’d conjured.

“Oh, uh... Marc got it for me.” Not totally a lie since he had taught me how to make it.

“And the sweater?”

“Just pulled it out of the back of my closet.”

Dad nodded but like he didn’t fully believe me, and I hoped he didn’t think I’d started stealing or something. “You sure have been different lately.” He nudged my shoulder. “Not *bad*. That Marc seems like a good influence on a few things. Good in... all things?”

“What are you asking?”

Dad chuckled and said, “You know, there’s only one question I need to ask. Does Marc make you happy, Avriel? Are you happy with how things are going?”

I guess that was the only question that mattered. “I think so. It’s scary sometimes, but... Yeah, I’m really happy.”

He grabbed my shoulder again for a quick half-hug and kissed my temple. “That’s all I want for you. But you better get going, huh?” He nodded at my alarm clock, like a twisted tree holding the clock face in its branches, and then stood to head for the door. “And I need to get back to bed. Oh! Did something happen to the back door? I kept meaning to ask, but it looks brand-new.”

I fought to keep my face from showing my panic. “Just buffed it up a bit the other day. Looked dingy.”

He opened his mouth to ask more.

“Coat rack is new though,” I beat him to the punch. “Thrift store find, but in way better condition than ours.” Half of that was true—or at least that’s where Marc said he got the new coat rack. “And Dad? Thanks again. Really.”

“Of course, kiddo. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I closed the door after he left to get one more look at myself in the mirror. Then I added the Horadrim necklace from Eryn and Fry—the real thing, not a conjuring—and tucked it under the sweater. I liked wearing it even when it didn’t match my outfit.

I might piss off Mr. Olafsson if I never went back to Ole’s, even if Dad had talked to him, but I didn’t care. Finally, things were going my way. For the first time in my life, I could do anything and everything I’d ever wanted, no longer tied to a job I didn’t want or a future I was unsure of.

Well, I was still unsure of what future I wanted as a potential demon king, but I was winning. I was happy, especially with Marc. He was probably the only person who could ever understand and still want this new me. I was truly happy.

And finally getting everything I deserved.



“EARTH TO MARC! Did you hear me?”

In my defense, when Eryn started prattling on sometimes, genius though she may be, I did occasionally tune her out like eccentrically dressed white noise. More so this past week, on pins and needles waiting for the next avatar to finally arrive and fucking dear Avi on the regular to keep our minds off it, my thoughts kept drifting.

Even with my prick buried so deep inside the wee king that I could feel his knot squished up against my stomach, tempting

me with its gargantuan girth—which I still hadn't had the pleasure of being split open by—I kept having *feelings* and wondered what it might be like if I just...

Stayed.

“Sorry, love. Miles away. Didn't sleep much last night.” Which was true, not that I needed sleep, but it was a pleasant pastime. Instead of dozing, I'd stared at the ceiling of my flat all night, pathetically mourning that it wasn't one of the times when Avi neglected to kick me to the curb after a rowdy shag so I wouldn't still be in his bed when his father got home.

“I *said*, I think we need to cover all possible causations for self-sabotage, and then with each point discuss whether that relates to systemic benefits or pitfalls and how to combat them,” Eryn rattled off yet another astute assessment for our coaching projects as easily as discussing her favorite skill trees in a video game.

“Fear of failure being a top point?” I broached.

“And fear of success. Ooo!” She bounced in her seat. “That can be another differentiator for us! I'll take on failure, and you do success, since you're doing the perspective of someone with no systemic roadblocks. Fear of success and guilt over that success as someone who 'has it easier' could definitely be a reason for self-sabotage.”

Prattler or not, I seriously loved this girl.

Not that I wasn't contributing my fair share, mind ya.

The prof was giving us the last fifteen minutes of class each day to work on our projects, whether alone or with input from classmates, though Eryn and I were the only ones doing ours jointly. We still both needed to fulfill the assignment and have varied enough content to justify two separate grades. If our final projects were too similar, and not just complementary to each other's theses, he'd give us one grade and split it.

Meaning an A could still be a C.

Stingy git.

“Brilliant as ever, Miss Schiffer.” I bowed my head at her. She had on an oversized sweater dress today that came down to the same hem as what I think were black shorts, maybe a skirt, maybe nothing but her undies and stockings under that hem honestly, in thick horizontal stripes of pink and black.

It was always impossible to not picture Avi in everything she wore, partially because of their similar sizes and blond hair, but lately, my daydreams about dress-up twink had been getting worse.

“Let’s just be sure that in our analysis of causations in both cases,” I continued, mimicking her expert ramblings as best I could, “specific personal inventory needs to be investigated for all individuals to ensure there isn’t overlap. Such as points that could refute our assertions, or even instances where a person benefits from some systemic elements and suffers from others.” I sipped from my overpriced coffee shop mocha as Eryn squealed in delight.

“Perfect!”

I’d bought the coffee, finding myself quite addicted to it like ninety percent of this world. I preferred the really bad for you kind—the four hundred plus calories kind, full of sugar and milk and whipped cream to boot. I’d gotten the same for Eryn. A demon didn’t need to be rude.

Damn, mochas were good though, coating my tongue with its saturated fats. All human food I’d tried was delicious, even a few of the healthy ones. Well maybe not pineapple. Or Hawaiian pizza for that matter. But then, not everyone liked to toss another person’s salad, so to each their own.

I also could have gone without the occasional stench of BO in the halls, but it wasn’t all that different from sulfur really. Found that scent on occasion too—usually in the blokes’ loo. Made it all feel a bit too much like home most days.

But with mobile reception.

Food delivery.

Online purchasing.

Halloween decorations that weren't actual entrails of neighboring tribes—which were already Christmas decorations on this plane of existence, despite the requisite turkey holiday looming.

Sunshine.

Calming storms.

Flavored lube.

Avi.

I was drinking the humanity Kool-Aid and preferring it over my own kin's swill.

That hadn't been the plan.

"I'm getting so excited! I could work on this all weekend." Eryn saved her notes and stowed her iPad as the chimes over the sound system signaled the end of class. "Well not *all* weekend." She pulled her mobile out in place of it, keeping my attention as the rest of class started to disperse.

I didn't bother leering after the departing Brent, though torturing him had been an even more favored pastime than naps.

Eryn showed me a digital flier for downtown Vale's apparently annual *Gray Friday Sales*. It was the local shops' attempt at reducing Black Friday insanity the following weekend. "Could be fun," she said. "Get some early Christmas shopping in, double date kinda thing?"

"I assume I'm being shown this first 'cause ya expect me to do the Avi convincing?"

"Pretty please." She clutched the sleeve of my sweater with a playful tug. "Ooo, cashmere, Mr. Smythe?" she added in a not-too-shabby approximation of my accent, though a bit more posh.

Might be cashmere. Truth be told, it was just my mind telling the fabric to be soft—something I never would have bothered Hell-side. Soft meant weak. Shred-able. Vulnerable. "Ever the eye for fashion, milady," I mimicked her posher brogue. "One must look one's best. And I'm sure I can

convince Avi,” I switched back to normal speech, looping my elbow with hers to stand and lead her from the classroom arm in arm. “He’s a new man these days.”

“He really is. And you’re to thank for it.”

I smiled, while a very annoying lurch twisted in my gut. That kept happening. Was there a pill to prevent a burgeoning conscience? Kill off Jiminy Cricket in his sleep? I was legitimately interested in a day out with my mates, no agenda, just spending time with these mugs.

How unsettling.

I tried, like I kept trying, to dismiss the bloody *feelings*. It was just the curse of being top-side and finally experiencing things I’d looked at longingly my whole life. I wouldn’t need to long for anything once I reached my full potential. When that happened, I wouldn’t miss... any of this.

“Send it my way,” I said, “and I’ll be sure to ambush Avi in Ethics.”

I did get a kick out of performing manipulations in Ethics class. Positive manipulation! Mostly. And a good opportunity to test out my coaching skills.

We didn’t spot Avi along the way, which wasn’t too odd, and after I parted with Eryn and found him already in the Ethics classroom, I saw why—hard at work hunched over his drawing pad in the usual seat.

He looked so good lately. Always had to me, but the air of confidence now, lack of a beanie, lack of anything oversized to hide in, amped it all up to—*fuck* eleven, more like twenty-one. I had a bit of a fantasy about sucking Avi’s cock while he wore that big jumper he’d had on the first day we met. Now Eryn’s sweater dress too. *With* the beanie, just so I could watch it shake loose while his body jerked once we switched to fucking.

I needed to sneak an adjustment of my jeans as I climbed the stairs to join Avi. Being a lust demon was as delightful as it was maddening with a tantalizing partner. I wondered if we could sneak in a quickie before class, but the room unfairly

lacked closet space or large enough whiteboards to hide behind.

Avi jerked his head up at my shadow falling over his sketchpad, immediately covering it from prying eyes, only to relax when he saw it was me.

“Whatcha working on?” I asked, sitting beside him.

He let me gander at what proved to be a detailed depiction of him in demon form, similarly positioned to mine, with his glorious new additions since the last avatar. “Self-portrait.” He shrugged. “Wanted one to match yours.” He flipped the pad closed then, just as I caught a glimpse of a few details I didn’t remember seeing in person—like a fifth horn coming out of his forehead like a unicorn or lizard with frills.

Premonition maybe? He didn’t have them in the psychic hotline sense, more Jedi or Spidey senses and good intuition. Which was why I had to honestly want him to succeed as demon king and honestly like him. I’d been relieved when both proved easy upon meeting the sweet chap, because it meant he wouldn’t see my ruse coming till it was over.

“I should be working on practical art in my spare time,” he said with a wrinkle of his nose, “but it’s all been a little overwhelming lately. Won’t be as bad going forward though. I don’t have to put in any more hours at Ole’s.”

“Ya quit?”

“Dad saved to help cover the rest of my year’s tuition.”

“No kiddin’? Go Big Papa. Bet yer relieved about that.”

“You have no idea. How do *you* pay for classes?” he asked with an accusing side-eye.

“Strictly by the books financial aid.”

Avi’s expression said he didn’t buy that, and I grinned unrepentantly.

He was teetering on the brink of new revelations, new confidences and freedoms, and it was my job to tip the scales to keep my plan on track. Thanks to my and Eryn’s project, I

had the principles of coaching to help someone through avoiding self-sabotage pared down to four distinct categories.

First being: Goal Setting.

“Sounds like ya’ll have plenty of time to work on what you want that business portfolio to look like, so ya can kickstart yer freelance career with a big Avi bang.”

Avi fingered the edges of his sketchpad. More of our classmates were pouring in, and he dropped his voice lower. “Assuming I still want that. After the last avatar, what if I...”

“What? Thought you were gonna lock up the veil forever, keep Hell out, and continue being Avi the mere mortal.”

There was that hunger in his eyes again, even just staring at the cover of his book. His eyes flicked upward, capturing me in a breath that almost stuck in my throat. “You’re going to say I told you so, aren’t you?”

“I’d never.”

“It’s not like I want Hell on Earth.” Avi chuckled. “But I don’t know. I could have so much more than I ever dreamed of. Right?”

Truth was, I’d thought I might need him to close the veil when this was done. I’d needed him to embrace his megalomaniac side a little to build his confidence enough to lay waste to our adversaries, but if he went full demon king and wanted it all like I’d teased him, I was poised to have enough power to close the veil behind me when I took Hell for myself. I had a feeling it was going to be easier to close the veil than keep it open without the full power of the avatars, and Avi had unknowingly allowed me to take more of their energies than I’d ever dreamed.

We’d both have kingdoms. It wasn’t total betrayal, just... smart business.

“Marc?”

“Spot on!” I answered quickly after an annoyingly telling pause. “Ya could have anything.” Next coaching lesson being: Assessment Taking. “All that matters is ya consider what *you*

want and don't feel rushed to decide what that is. What makes ya happy, Avi? What's something small that brings my adorable poppet joy?"

Which led to the next bit: Small Wins.

"Baby steps. If ya can't decide what ya want for the long haul, what do ya want to do this weekend?" I pulled out my mobile and showed him the text from Eryn with the info on Gray Friday Sales, which was Saturday and Sunday and therefore, quite confusing.

"Gray Friday Sales, sure. I never do stuff like that, even when Eryn begs me. Tell her we're in." Avi surprised me by not resisting at all, which was definitely a small win for me, though I didn't know why I'd wanted him to agree so badly, when it didn't relate to any larger plans. "I'll need to think of what to wear." He looked at his current manifestation like he wanted to keep outdoing himself. Be still my girded loins. "There's always so many people around for that weekend."

The last part of my four-step coaching program was the most important: Positive Reinforcement. "Whatever ya come up with, love, ya'll knock the locals' socks off—and my undies, most like. Yer an absolute treat for the eyes in everything I see ya in." I kissed his cheek, and though his face flushed like usual, he looked at me like he believed my devotion more and more.

Just like I wanted.

Right?



"YOU OKAY, MAN?"

Reckon I wasn't.

And hadn't been for a while.

Bloody humans and their bloody addictive coffee, entertainment, and too good for this world cambions. Plus, Fry was the one asking. I must have been as transparent as a saran wrap over the toilet bowl prank.

“Up in my head, ain’t I? Nothing wrong really. Just not quite where I’d expected to be, I s’ppose.”

“Main Street? Or with Avi? With us?”

Those were quite a few words from my stoic mate.

Gray Friday Sales was a serious to-do. Vale was a quaint town. Population boasting over twenty thousand, but twenty to thirty percent of that were college students from the two campuses. Meant its cobblestoned Main Street had some small-town New England charm to it for being in the Midwest but could still get oppressively crowded.

Avi didn’t seem to mind, walking arm in arm with Eryn ahead of us. He’d hunched a bit on our arrival, having walked down from the hill, but was basking in his newly discovered sex appeal and the perusing glances from birds and blokes alike. No surprise, given he’d gone with a James Dean look today. Blue jeans, white T-shirt, and black leather jacket did wonders for any physique, and on Avi... *fuck*.

Ya coulda seen a dime through the back pocket of that denim.

He really was better though, in the more comfortable in his skin sense. I knew he’d still prefer a night in with just us, not surrounded by a crowd of shopping soccer mums looking to beat each other to the best deals, but he’d come out of his shell like a bright gleaming pearl.

“Right on the money,” I admitted to Fry, as we passed one of the brick-building knickknack shops, already brightly decorated with Christmas lights.

“You’re good together,” Fry said, not having to keep his voice too low, since the bustle on the sidewalks and spilling into the closed off streets for the event meant we were encircled by a constant din.

“Ya think so?”

“Totally. You fit. Some people just... fit.”

Fry smiled, with his Brad Pitt in *Meet Joe Black* like attractiveness—though Death between him and Avi was definitely in the more petite of the pair.

Eryn was dragging Avi into the next shop, a clothing store with outdoorsy attire. As we followed, Fry sidled up beside Eryn to steal her away from Avi, like an invitation for me to do the same. Eryn dragged Fry to a pair of knee-high hiking boots, leaving Avi to look back in search of me.

We fit, did we? I knew Fry meant more than just how I could tuck Avi against my side and cradle his head beneath my chin. Fry and Eryn fit the same way, one of those couples that looked like they belonged together. They weren't identical. Not opposites attract either. But they complimented each other like any parts that might be missing were found in the other and made them whole.

Humanity was turning me into a soddin' romantic.

“Ooo, Avi, look at these!” Eryn called across the crowded store, which was a bit like moving through a funhouse tunnel, when half the people had on winter coats they didn't need yet and forced either a single file line or melding of bodies to get from the cramped front of the store to the display of hats Eryn had discovered.

They lined an entire wall in an array of colors and styles, mostly beanie types, half with puffballs, and a few, like the one Eryn snatched off the wall, the overly slouchy type, even more so than Avi's original. Instead of black and admittedly dingy from over-wear, this one was ombre from blue to white to teal, like the gay men's pride flag.

Proper perfect for Avi, and when Eryn flopped it onto his head, one of the other types of lurches that kept ensnaring my gut made me want to grab his face by either side of that hat and kiss him.

“You could use an upgrade,” Eryn said. “*When* you wear one.”

Avi squeezed past a mother dragging two kids by the hand to get to the mirror beside the display.

I went up behind him to peer over his head at our reflections. “I like this one. Like the other one too, love, just not that ya hide yerself in it.”

Avi flushed a little but turned his head this way and that with a growing smile. Eryn was already dragging Fry to the next exciting discovery when Avi took the hat off but kept hold of it with obvious intent to buy. I caught the cheeky bugger flash his hair white into his demon form to fix any stray strands, and he smirked when he turned around like he’d gotten away with something.

He had. I doubted anyone noticed. But I think he might be getting away with something I hadn’t thought I’d want to give up. Namely, everything. Because no matter how much I tried to ignore these new *feelings*, I didn’t want to lose them.

We caught up to Eryn and Fry in the checkout queue. She’d found a miles-long scarf that she’d tied around her and Fry’s necks, where I imagined it would stay for the rest of the afternoon.

“Gettin’ any inspiration?” I said to Avi with a nudge at a climbing gear harness that was being displayed on an otherwise naked mannequin. “Certainly gives me ideas.”

He elbowed me but also pressed his hip into my cock with absolute purpose.

“I’m way too afraid of heights for climbing.” Eryn seemed to have overheard me but clearly missed the meaning. “Avi is too.”

“I’ve been a little less afraid of them lately.” Avi pressed his hip into me again, the four of us creeping closer to the front, and I didn’t even mind the monotony of that part. I found myself wondering, seriously, impossibly, if it would be so terrible to let things stay the way they were and throw my plan into the rubbish bin.

A sudden stomach drop assaulted me, like my insides were tethered to something far, far away and being tugged that

direction.

“*Finally.*” Avi clutched my wrist with a maniacal grin.

A veil tear.

“Not exactly a good thing with Eryn and Fry right here,” I hissed back. “Not to mention the *crowd.*”

A sensible look of how fucked we were engulfed Avi’s expression. “Shit. We need to find it and lure it away from the people. Uh... hey, guys.” Avi passed his hat into Eryn’s hands. “I am so sorry, but I suddenly really need to find a bathroom. Can I pay you back for the hat, and we’ll run across the street to Blue Monday? We’ll grab drinks for everyone. My treat.”

“No way!” Eryn teased. “I am totally getting you the hat, no repayment necessary. We’ll meet you there. You know what we like.”

Whether Avi did or didn’t, we barely waited for her last sentence to finish before we fled.

The outside sidewalks and streets for several blocks in each direction were possibly more crowded than before, and if an avatar emerged amongst it all, it was going to be a massacre.

“This way!” Avi grabbed my hand, weaving us through the crowd.

I could feel it too. The tear was new, still forming, but we didn’t have much time.

One blessed break was when we reached the cross-section where an alley cut toward a less populated area, mostly leading to the Toadstool Bar and Grill and a few walking paths along the river, which would still have bystanders but hopefully an amount I could keep veiled from seeing—

“Ooff!” Avi thumped into someone as we sprinted around the corner, causing me to thump into him. Someone had been fleeing in a similar mad rush as us with his head bowed and a hat so low over his eyes, he’d been begging for disaster.

“Mind watching where yer going there—”

“*Brent?*” Avi finished, as our collider tilted his head up and met our stares.

Brenty-boy indeed.

And not alone.

“Who’s this?” an older man asked, coming up behind him, and causing Brent’s eyes to bug.

The same man who’d been with Brent at the Toadstool that time before.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

U h..." Brent fumbled for words as his panic ratcheted, which I won't lie, was seriously satisfying given how much grief he'd put me through the past three years.

"I know you," the man said—the one Brent had been with in the bar when he'd seemed so intent on hiding. "Nathan's kid, sure. You go to school with Brent up the hill, right? We always talk about how proud we are of our go-getters." He gripped Brent's shoulder with a firm *fatherly* squeeze.

That was it. That was *all*. That's why this man looked familiar. I'd probably seen him at the plant, at a company picnic or something, but also, he looked so much like Brent, just older, rounder, and a lot less smug.

Not that Brent looked smug now.

"Yeah," I said, swallowing back my bile. Then I flicked my eyes to Brent. "Didn't know your dad worked at the plant."

"So does he." His father shook his shoulders, and Brent's nauseated look turned greener. "He's worked for every scrap he's needed to pay for that insane tuition, just like you."

"*Dad*," Brent bit out.

"I know, I know." He shook Brent's shoulders again and released him. "Worth it for all that place offers and where you'll be able to go, but still steep, right? And you're...?" His eyes scanned over Marc, who reached to shake his hand, gentlemanly as always.

"Marc Smythe, sir. Transfer student. An absolute delight to meet ya."

I'm sure he meant it, given how much he enjoyed making Brent squirm, but I was too broiling mad to see the humor.

"I'll give you boys a minute," his father said and headed past me toward the busy street.

"Avi..." Marc muttered, smiling, but reminding me of our ticking clock.

"Give us a minute," I repeated Brent's dad.

"Whatever ya say, love."

"You're not a townie," I spat as soon as Marc moved down the alley. "I'd remember you. It's not that big of a town."

There was a side entrance into the Toadstool down this alley and access to the outdoor patio in back, so enough people moved past us going either direction that Marc tilted his head toward the wall to stay hidden. "I lived with my mom before getting into Iggy's, a few towns over."

"*That's* why you were hiding from me in the bar? Because you have a job, and it's at the plant with your dad? You think I'd actually care you had to work like I did to... urg!" I clenched my fists as I trailed off and tried to keep from biting through my bottom lip. "Because of your stupid image," I growled. "Because you're a frat guy, and most of them come from money, and your girlfriend's parents are loaded too—"

"Hey." Brent's eyes flashed upward with the first rekindling of alpha jock. "Yeah, Kristen doesn't need financial aid. Good for her. She knows I do, knows how much I work, covers for me half the time when I need to put in hours too. I just didn't... want..."

"What? To be seen as lesser than your peers because you need to work a little harder for what they got so easily? To be pitied, taken advantage of, or outright ignored?"

"Yeah," Brent said quietly, back to cowed, and not even trying to deny my accusations.

"You're an asshole," I bit out, with a real growl to it, but I didn't care. Heat was filling the insides of my fists, and I seriously wanted something to punch.

Brent was lucky I decided it wouldn't be his face.

I pushed past him. He'd acted terrified after the bar, hid himself more, paid for my drawing for once, even tried talking to me at one of their big frat parties, all because he'd worried I might spill the truth that he was more like me than anyone knew. That's what I was in his eyes—something to feel shame over and that needed to be hidden.

Just like I'd always felt too, but for far more than a small house or putting in hours at a fucking convenience store.

Not anymore. And not because Dad saved and worked hard to help me pay off my tuition so I wouldn't have to work at stupid Ole's, but because I was done hiding or thinking I was as pathetic and forgettable as everyone else treated me. I was *done* being relegated to the background when I was destined for something greater, and nothing was going to keep me from taking what I'd earned ever again.

“Er, sorry to interrupt the fuming and all, love, but... I found the tear.”

“What?” I jerked my head up to find Marc beside me. I'd stomped to the railing leading to the patio, which I'd clung to so tightly, there was a noticeable dent in the wrought iron like bending a spoon.

I yanked my hands back, glancing over my shoulder to watch Brent meet up with his dad at the mouth of the alley. He spared me one last pleading look, still only caring that I knew his deep dark secret, before he tugged his hat lower and escaped into the crowd.

“It's here?” I asked, meaning the avatar, since we knew the tear was close, but I could feel the avatar too, the pulse of power and uncontrollable *want* emanating from it.

“Hope ya still like horror classics after this one,” Marc said and pulled me from the damaged railing to the riverwalk.

Several buildings down the river to our left was a fading fizzle of light, and out of where the veil tear closed was the last of something oozing from that spot midair into a puddle,

pile, *glob* on the ground of more of the same gold and glittering gunk.

Greed.

It moved like something viscous spilling over a countertop, rolling up and over anything it encountered, slowly but steadily toward us. Once it left behind the things it touched, they were coated in a luminous sheen, frozen and lifeless, as if covered in gold plating—including the cobblestone walk, plant life, and one very unfortunate bird.

“You didn’t tell me that greed tribe’s Midas touch could mean—”

“I didn’t think the avatar would be like this!”

“Well, what do we do?!”

I could hear voices on the patio, and a glance back proved a couple had already noticed the shimmer of gold along the riverwalk, if not the demonic blob causing it.

“You’re using your illusions?” I nudged Marc roughly.

“Of course I am.”

“But they can still see the trail!”

“I can’t cover that, us, and the moving blob, now, can I? Or my powers will stretch too thin and be bollocks. Unless ya want people to see what we’re about to turn into or notice us standing here while a golden trail heads toward us.”

Where it might turn us into living—oh, God, I hoped not *living*—statues.

But at least that meant Marc had already hidden us and those people couldn’t see that we were here.

On one side of the blob’s trajectory was the stone and brick partition protecting people from falling into the river, the other the occasional garden beds with hearty winter plants like dogwood. The red branches spilling near the cobblestone turned to gold like everything else when the blob passed over it.

“What *is* that?” I heard from the patio and hoped they’d think it a publicity stunt for a yellow-brick road.

I blasted a beam of hellfire at Greed’s mass, as I shed my guise of humanity with a flex of my wings sprouting. The beam reflected off the blob like hitting the surface of a mirror and did zero damage.

“Fuck!”

Greed came faster, clearly gunning for us down the path, and at least a foot high now and expanding to the size of a living room rug.

An appendage longer than the spider legs of Gluttony shot out from its mass like a free-forming tentacle. I grabbed onto an only partially transformed Marc to leap us upward and took flight out of reach—only for the tentacle to grab my ankle anyway and wrap around tight.

It tugged, trying to yank us down, but as Marc’s wings unfurled, his added flaps kept us from crashing to the ground.

“Not too high!” he called when I tried to go higher. “*Look.*” Marc pulsed something from an outstretched hand that traveled down to within the center of the blob, and then rippled outward like mirage waves to show where his illusion spanned.

The tips of my wing spurs were almost out of range, and I ducked down just as I saw someone on the patio squinting at what they hopefully took for the flash of a bird wing.

The ripples continued, I assumed only visible to us, but it helped me steer in the very constrained area we had to work with. The blob’s tentacle kept pulling and creeping up my leg, turning my taloned foot to gold. The pain I expected didn’t strike, but a cold sensation shot through me that made me feel weighted even with Marc and me flying together.

Marc blasted his own fire at the tentacle, and it retracted with a monstrous screech from somewhere within the center of the blob. The fire burned where it ricocheted over my skin, but the gold parts felt nothing, and then thankfully withdrew as I

swooped Marc and I back down—directly below the patio of people taking a lot more interest in the golden trail.

My foot felt numb, but it was flesh and bone and corded armor again, and I shook it to get some of the feeling back. “How do we fight something we can’t touch?”

“Told ya not to get cocky.”

“You did not!”

“I’m sure I said something about cock—”

“Marc!” I snarled, not in the mood for jokes.

Greed was moving too fast. We’d reach the street soon with our backpedaling and had two choices from there: left toward where College Avenue hit the highway, or right toward Vale Tech, where the road passed the entrance into Main Street and a constant stream of people.

Marc grabbed my shoulders, the scratch of his claws over my armor a strange comfort.

“Concentrate. Yer hellfire can breach it, Avi. I know it.”

His assurances might have hit harder if the swing of two tentacles weren’t barreling our way. We turned in unison to blast the approaching pseudopods with a succession of parallel red and teal beams, close enough, fueled by adrenaline enough, that the ends of the tentacles ruptured.

The splatter was just as gold as everything else and coated the nearby bricks of the patio.

Greed hurled itself upward as if to stand taller—two feet, three—and I grabbed Marc’s hand to slap it onto my shoulder. I hoped he understood, as I thrust my hands outward, wrists together, palms spread, like a *Street Fighter* hadouken, and shot forward as much hellfire as I could.

In that same instant, I felt the requested surge of Marc’s power fill me with pain/pleasure like the physical pep talk I didn’t know I needed. But I did know. Whether pinning him to surfaces or being pinned, the sensations only Marc could stir in me made me feel stronger than anything else.

My burning teal beam cut through the gold like a laser, more and more, causing some of its mass to splatter like the tentacles or seeming chipped away.

Only to reform again.

I sagged, panting from the exertion of giving what I thought had been my all, but Greed was back to square one, worse, and getting bigger.

“Keep at it!” Marc squeezed my shoulder with another pulse of lust energy, and I fired my beam again.

“For how long? We’re getting too close to the street!” I wanted to surrender to the feelings Marc filled me with and launch forward like I had with Lust, rending and tearing, but with Greed, I’d be engulfed and devoured like a D&D adventurer meeting an ooze.

We continued backward as I tried to cut through it. People were spilling down from the patio now, creeping too close to the end of the golden trail, where if they touched the wrong thing that they couldn’t currently see, they’d be the next statue before we could stop it.

“This is all surface damage it can heal. We need to get to its center. Its center!” I repeated, giving some credit of my epiphany to Marc’s continued Cenobite touch, making my gut ache, and cock ache, and my mind alert with untapped revelations. “That’s it! It has to have a core that’s vulnerable, some epicenter of demon flesh that isn’t made of gold. I just need to weaken it enough, get at its center enough, to reach it.”

“Brilliant!” Marc agreed.

“More and more and *more...*” we heard from the blob, the first discernable speech other than growls and screeches.

Whether it meant itself or me, I knew it was right. I did want more. I wanted everything. I wanted what I’d earned, without having to feel like I didn’t deserve everything I’d worked for, everything I’d been denied my entire life.

And I wasn’t going to stand back and be a bystander any longer.

“I have an idea,” Marc said.

Greed knew too. They all knew by now, I assumed—that I wanted more. That I wasn’t content to be Avi’s minion, to be another demon’s property. I’d thought I wanted my own kingdom, my own destiny, but now...

I wanted whatever meant my dance with Avi kept twirling.

“I have an idea.”

Releasing Avi’s shoulder, I backed out of my illusions keeping spectators from seeing just how close they were to death. Human but guised like a ringmaster from a circus act, I formed my clothing into a suit with tails, top hat included, and wore a half and half comedy/tragedy mask to prevent anyone from recognizing Marc Smythe. Then I gave myself a dashing cane and called to the distracted crowd gathering at the trail’s edge.

“Attention, gentlefolk! Ready to follow the golden road to the prize?”

They looked up as if I’d appeared from nothing—which I absolutely had.

“Ah, ah!” I warned, trying not to sound panicked when one young woman got frighteningly close to reaching through the illusion and touching the back blob of Greed. “Don’t spoil the magic, dear heart.” I waved my cane, causing a sparkle of dancing lights to erupt at the safe zone. “Follow me, and we’ll see who gets the prize, but too close to the golden road and yer disqualified.”

I cringed at the unintentional rhyme.

“This way!” I directed and, in a final executive decision, chose to head toward Main Street, thinking people would be easier to avoid than traffic.

“You are amazing!” Avi called from within the illusion that only we could hear through.

He’d fired the start of his next wave of hellfire, a concentrated, constant beam at Greed’s center. I wished I could have spurred him on with another heated touch of my

most carnal desires, or even a mental illusion, but I had to focus on keeping my physical deceptions steady while he battled in what was otherwise plain sight.

And in front of what would soon be dozens of additional people as we neared the blocked off streets for Gray Friday Sales.

“Any treasure you find is yours to keep but reach past the line of magic and it’s forfeited to me.” That rhyme was intentional, but I’d do ten bloody Hail Satans later to make up for it.

I skipped, danced, bowed, and twirled my cane, all while Greed screeched and roared from Avi’s assault, and eventually forced him into the air again with flails of golden tentacles. But it was working. Avi was chipping away deeper and deeper into Greed’s center, allowing less and less time for it to heal.

The traffic cop at the Main Street intersection looked a bit bewildered, but purpose, confidence, and a bow while wearing a nicely tailored suit gave credence to almost anything a bloke might do.

My audience grew as I passed the entrance to the celebration of pre-Thanksgiving craft sales and the last outdoor food trucks of the year. I could tell Avi was getting tired, unable to let up from reaching the center of the golden tootsie pop. Such continuous use of my illusions was wearing me thin too. The crowd was listening at least, staying behind the sparkles, more interested in claiming golden rocks, leaves, flowers, and other stray baubles that were treasures now that they’d been turned to gold.

A tentacle caught Avi’s wrist and fired off his hellfire beam into the sky.

No one noticed, but I did. If that had veered into the crowd, it’d been a bloody swath of shellshocked carnage.

Avi tore the tentacle off, not caring that even that act caused his good hand to glitter, and pumped an extra burst of hellfire directly into Greed’s mass. He was aloft, trying to

avoid the next battering of tendrils, as he increased the output of what had to be the last of his reserves.

“What’s the prize?” someone yelled, their volume indicating they’d asked more than once.

“Whatever ya find till the road ends,” I said, “then off its path in the market bins.”

That’d send a few folks down Main Street.

“Ah!” Avi’s cry sent my attention back to him.

Greed had his legs, with more tendrils wrapped around his shoulders, but he was somehow managing to keep it from prying apart his hands, firing and firing, even while the gold inched over more of his body.

“More and more and more,” Greed chanted, and I was ready to leap forward and be damned what the onlookers witnessed, when finally, Avi reached Greed’s center.

Like a brain with beady eyes and a sharp-toothed maw—*yuck*. Less gold at its core, more goldenrod orange, the real Greed was a vulnerable pustule of squishy gray matter that brought a grin to Avi’s face.

Sloughing the tentacles from his body with a burst of power like breaking chains, Avi didn’t blast Greed’s core with another beam, no. He careened out of the sky with his sharpest, deadliest wing-spurs coming together like twin spears and drove them downward to impale the squirming, disgusting brain-spore like skewering a meatball.

The rest of Greed blasted apart with the same magnificence as Avi shedding its bindings, erupting in a shower of the usual sparks of demonic energy in that goldenrod orange.

Which I made sure the crowd saw.

“Whoa!” someone cried, looking skyward to watch what must have seemed like a firework going off.

As everyone’s eyes followed, I ducked out of sight around the nearest building, returning to the outfit I’d been in before, and used all my remaining concentration to keep my illusions

wrapped solely around Avi. I was too far away to take in any of Greed's energy, but I could feel it coming, feel *Avi* coming, with the energy surging up around him like a mantle of pulsing power.

The hill up this side of town wasn't as long as the one to our campus, but it was steeper, causing more nuanced crevices and alleyways between buildings. Even from the nook I'd tucked into to stay hidden, I could hear the bustle of Gray Friday Sales to my right. It was cramped and tight, with brick at my back and in front of me, and a nearby backdoor that someone could open and find me beside at any moment.

Then Avi stepped into view at the alley's mouth like a herald of doom with how he blocked the light, and a hunger on his face stronger than anything after Lust or Gluttony.

He grinned, larger than life, larger than before, with the swirl of orange mist around him that hadn't yet dissipated or been consumed. It lit up his manic expression with ominous shadows as contrast. He wanted more too. More and more and *more*.

And as he launched himself toward me, I knew I was the only thing to sate him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I was still human when Avi hurled himself into the alley after me and tore my recently re-manifested jeans from my body like shredding wrapping paper on a belated birthday present.

“Avi—”

He kissed me, a bruising press that made me feel his fangs through our connected lips. Then they clattered against my flat teeth as he ravenously searched for my tongue. Before I’d shed the rest of my clothing, Avi hefted me up the wall with one arm and speared me onto his cock.

“*A-Avi.*”

He might as well have been living gold, as hard as precious metal, and gleaming bright from the lingering essence of Greed. As he thrust his ridged cock into me without the barest brush of a courtesy finger, he fed me some of Greed’s energy, twirling it up one arm to concentrate it in his hand. He let the energy swirl between our mouths so we could share its consumption through our kiss.

I licked out with my tongue, feeling Avi’s coil around mine, as the energy entered us. If Sloth had made us confident in where we stood, Lust made us hornier, and Gluttony made us ravenous, then Greed made us want it all more and more and *more*.

“Give it to me,” Avi spoke against my mouth with sharper thrusts that pressed his knot against—but not yet in—my pucker with the most wonderous pressure and stretch. “Give it to me!”

He was giving it to *me*, but I knew what he meant.

His addiction to my pain/pleasure touch, like his sweetness was an addiction for me.

Still human, barely fanged or red-eyed and catching my breath, I gave Avi what he wanted with the touch of my hands around his armored neck, sharing the elixir of where pain and pleasure melded into something indescribable. I used to be able to describe it, but with Avi, it echoed between us with throb after throb through my insides, leading me to new heights of what bliss from being buggered could really feel like.

Avi growled against my neck and flicked the tip of his forked tongue along my ear. *Fuck*. Who was the demon here, eh? With each stretch of my hole, accepting the barest girth of Avi's knot, the studs along the ridges of every inch already inside me had me rethinking my belief in Heaven, because it absolutely existed and was in the slam of Avi's cock.

He bit my neck like a fucking vampire to start sucking my blood, claws digging into my hips as he held me and thumped me up the wall with hearty slams.

"*Change*," Avi commanded, and far be it for me to deny my king.

What remained of my clothing vanished, as I growled in echo and unleashed the demon in me, not bothering with my harness or waist covering when I knew Avi liked me bare.

He was vicious in his slams, so tight against me as he fucked me into the wall that my cock dragged up and down the corded armor of his stomach. The friction of different textures was nearly as good as being inside him or grinding our cocks together.

"More. More!" Avi lapped up the last of Greed's energy, and I honestly didn't know how much we'd each taken. My mind was a haze of joy and surrender and fullness stretching me on the brink of breaking apart.

Avi's bulb popped in partially with a pressure I'd never known. The zing of pleasure it shot through me, with the rest

of him so deep in me too, made my grip on his neck tighten. I feared I might choke him, but another day, another kink. Instead, I reached up to grip his downward pointing horns and held tight as he pounded into me.

I could see his fifth horn, the bud of it forming, right out of his forehead like his drawing.

Avi's grip around my hips was building heat. He hadn't registered how my fire could hurt him now too. The burns had healed, swift as ever, but he'd hissed when my flames licked his skin while knocking away Greed's tentacle, because my hellfire, my abilities, were growing strong enough to almost keep up with him.

Almost, because *fuck*, I couldn't have escaped Avi's clutches if I'd wanted to, or the sear of his touch, or the power he had over me.

The smell of him wafted up around me the same as Greed's energy, and I reveled in its musk, in how the barest whiff that first day had sent my loins reeling, and so much more when it was straight from his cock.

Not only musk. Power. Potency.

Destiny.

More! I could feel Avi's knot about to split me open, and all it needed to finally, finally breach me fully was one last hurdle to make way and—

The thickest part at its center pushed inside me, and the whole mass of Avi suctioned up deeper like I was trying to swallow him.

If I hadn't been built as tough on the inside as my armor without, Avi would have cracked my ribs and torn me in two with how ferociously he fucked me with the success of spearing me completely. I surrendered as limply as when Sloth drained my energy but chased how monstrously good it felt with clenches around Avi's girth, unable to do anything else but bob up the wall with his slams.

“G-good boy, Avi.... *Fuck*, that's as good as I imagined.”

When I tell you the most delicious dread and excitement flitted through me at his next words, I cannot possibly overstate it.

“We’re not done yet.”

I yelped when my tender entrance—that I could only imagine the state of—was tenderized further by something like a dry tongue grazing its pried-apart edges.

Avi’s tail, thicker than mine and more ridged, but still with a spaded tip, was circling back and forth around the stretch of my hole like it might join the knot. I would literally split apart if it did, but the circling and teasing and *danger* that he might do it anyway made me moan so loudly, I knew someone from the street must have heard me. I was a ragdoll at his mercy as he thrust and thrust and *thrust*.

“Fuck!” I yelped again when my previously squished cock had all new attention, as Avi moved his tail from torturing my hole to wrap around my length and twisted in a coil that felt like the suction of a mouth. “Oh, fuck... *f-fuck*...”

“Say you’ll never be with anyone else.”

“Never.” Who could compare?

“Say you’re mine. Always.”

“Yers!” No one else’s—ever again.

“Say you love me.”

I snapped my head back hard enough to crack it against the wall, staring at Avi, at his pale face with cheekbones carved more deeply from added ridges there too, deep teal, with black studs along his jawline like the ones on his prick.

“Say it,” he demanded with the sweetest of desperation that made me never want to disappoint him.

“I love you.”

Avi’s tail squeezed my cock in the same instant his knot pulsed larger, and he redoubled his slams until we no longer touched the ground. We were airborne, with Avi’s wings

beating to blow cooling air over my skin and keep us anchored up the wall.

“Yes,” he rumbled. “I love you. I love you! You’re mine. *Mine*. And we are going to remake this world together.”

Did he mean that?

Did he want that?

Did I...?

Avi’s claws on my hips burned with a pulse of hellfire hotter than I could handle, and I gasped. He didn’t seem to notice, driving his knot into me deeper, and making the fullness in me crescendo, as he stroked my cock with his tail.

Another burn.

A *burn*, not a sear, pleasantly bordering on rapture. Avi was rolling his thumbs over my hip bones with hellfire building hotter, drawing loops with blazing torment.

“A-Avi...”

“I love you. I love you,” he kept chanting, but it hurt. I liked the same mix of pleasure/pain he did, but this *hurt*. The burn inside me was glorious, the drag on my walls, the fullness, the friction, the slam against my prostate like a gong again and again, but his thumbs, his fire, it was carving into me like the worst of my previous master’s brands, and I needed him to stop.

“S-stop. It’s too much.”

Avi kept going like he hadn’t heard me.

“Avi, *stop*.”

Still no response, and the pain was becoming unbearable.

“Avriel, stop!”

His eyes cleared at last, hips stuttering. He stopped. He listened. The heat subsided, and he started to thrust slower, but still deep, so deep. That was a precipice he hadn’t crossed before, but like I’d warned him, like I knew would happen,

ascending to what he truly was would change him. It was changing him.

And I realized I didn't want him to lose the last of what had first made me... love him.

Because I did. I hadn't lied.

I bloody fucking loved him.



MARC SAID MY NAME. My name. Our safe word that meant I'd gone too far.

As soon as it registered, I'd released the hellfire from my hands with a cooling balm replacing it to sooth where I'd branded him. It just felt so good to be inside him. Finally, finally inside him. So good to have my knot swallowed up and pulsing larger with every thrust along his slick, tight heat.

"Are you okay?" I asked, cradling his face with my claws, even as I continued to fuck him up the wall.

He moaned in a way that sounded purely pleasurable and held my face right back. "Hail to the king, love. *My* king. I swear it. Mine. Just as you are."

"Yours," I said and turned my head to kiss the inside of his palm.

I rallied, wings beating to keep Marc pressed where he was, and rolled my hips with so much momentum, they might have vibrated.

"F-f-fuuuuck!" Marc's wings spread out behind him like a spider under glass. They twitched, and as my knot pulsed even bigger, Marc keened a long string of nonsensical moans and spilled between us with a blazing hot expulsion.

The tighter clench around my cock, around my knot as Marc came, brought me to the brink right with him. I thrust

until there was nothing left between us to release, filling Marc with enough fluid that some dribbled back out from the excess.

The flap of my wings slowed, lowering us to solid ground. I wanted to kiss him but tried to pull out first to give him reprieve.

Tried, not succeeded.

“Uh... I think I’m stuck.”

Marc laughed, tightening around my knot again, and milking more release from me that I didn’t think I had. “What a travesty.”

I laughed with him and dropped my forehead to his. Then I pulled up to be sure I hadn’t bonked him too sharply with the start of my new horn. I think I’d known it was coming from the itch that had been there all week.

Marc nuzzled against its still rounded protrusion. “We can stay like this for as long as ya want, Avi. I don’t mind not moving.”

“Because you love me?” I chuckled again, feeling foolish, considering I otherwise felt like king of the world, not to mention Hell, and had my knot deep inside my boyfriend after thoroughly wrecking him. But I still felt vulnerable asking that.

I hadn’t meant to demand it of him. I never meant to demand any of the things that left me when I was like that, but when the power clouded everything else, and all I felt was desire, Marc was where that desire led.

I was supposed to be cradling him, what with my knot still speared inside him and all, still coming down from how thick it had grown. Yet somehow, with the way Marc wrapped his arms around my neck and looked me right in the eyes with the most beautiful shimmer in all that fire-like crimson, it felt like he was cradling me.

“Yeah, Avi. Because I love you.”

I kissed him as fiercely as when I’d pinned him to the wall. “I love you too.”

We did eventually dislodge, clean up, return human, and head back down to Main Street—through the alleys, but after a quick peek at the golden trail, which still had people gathering up trinkets, but seemed to be taken as the publicity stunt I'd hoped.

Four avatars down, which meant only two left, and three possibilities for who my mother might be. I wondered who it was: Prince of Pride, Envy, or Wrath. Regardless, I knew how this had to end, and it was with me creating a world where assholes like Brent couldn't make weaklings like me feel pathetic ever again.

With Marc beside me.

“There you are!” Eryn and Fry found us just as we reached the Blue Monday coffee shop. “Where are our drinks?”

“Uh...” I knew I had literally no explanation I could give them.

Eryn giggled, and Fry looked like he *knew* too—sans the saving the day part—as she plopped my new hat onto my head. “Come on, losers. You two are totally still buying.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

First, let me admit, my lovelies, I was fully aware that I was royally fucked.

I'd never felt so incredibly strong or capable or like I could be master of my own destiny and would clearly surpass all the princes once we defeated the last avatar—if a notch or two less powerful than Avi. But point was, I knew I could win. I could fulfill my plan, use my growing power to subvert the worst of Avi's, and slip away after the last fight right when the pretty princeling thought he had me.

If I didn't love the bugger.

Figured I had two options: continue the plan and leave when we both reached our pinnacle or prostrate myself before King Avi and pledge my undying devotion to whatever mad design he now had for Hell and the world.

I didn't want either option. I wanted Avi, and he was a little less *Avi* every day.

It had been several days since Gray Friday Sales with Greed nearly laying waste to holiday shoppers. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving to be precise, and no one was paying much bother in classes. If Avi and I had been shagging on the regular before, it was three times as frequent now, usually with him driving that knot deep inside me and making my lust demon dreams come true.

I didn't mind that part. Would have happily let him skewer me forever. But every so often during the height of our throes, I'd worry his hellfire was growing too hot again and wondered if I'd need to use his name.

And if he'd listen when I did.

He'd stopped that day in the alley, but he almost hadn't.

This was what I'd wanted. This was what Avi was supposed to become. He was the spawn of a prince of Hell, destined to be more powerful than any of them and rule as the first king. I hadn't expected him to hang onto any of sweet human Avi, had I? But after a while, I had, and now, those pesky *emotions* I kept feeling were telling me to not let it happen.

I'd nearly confessed more than once since then, but the brands Avi left on my hips were visible scars even when I was human. My illusions couldn't hide them. Talk about potent. He hadn't noticed. Almost never saw me naked out of demon form, and then the marks tended to blend with the others.

So, don't ya dare judge, but I was bloody well terrified to confess I'd planned to betray him. Yeah, I liked me some pain/pleasure mixed, the blood-play, the rough-play, being punctured in more ways than one, and I didn't want to lose the edge of that. I'm a demon! But I also liked the gentle pressure of Avi's head on my shoulder watching a film like some sappy, pathetic human couple, and...

I guess that made me pathetic too.

And I wasn't ready to give it up.

"Again? I am so getting a new iPad. Pencils are useless!"

It wasn't Eryn this time drawing my thoughts to the present with an eruption in Coaching class, but the bloke sat behind us. I swear that was the third pencil he'd snapped in two.

Repressed much?

Eryn *was* prattling but hadn't realized I wasn't listening. Brent had been avoiding my gaze like usual but was clearly having some sort of war with his mobile rather than working on his project. Whatever he was trying to fat-thumb or swipe to who I assumed was girlfriend Kristen was not turning out the way he wanted, and he kept huffing and starting over. Everyone was anxious before a long weekend, I s'posed.

Not everyone had the harbinger of the apocalypse to look after.

“What if ya no longer want to help the person yer coaching?” I interrupted whatever Eryn had been spouting, and she stopped mid-breath before her next tirade to squint at me. “For the project, I mean. Should we include reasons someone maybe... *should* fail?”

“What do you mean?” She squinted harder.

“Say, if a bloke or bird’s intentions or methods are morally objectionable or somethin’. Ya wouldn’t want to coach the next Hitler on how to win an election if ya recognized what a arse he was, yeah?”

“Oh, so something about whether it’s right to coach someone toward a position that might require methods you personally have a moral stance against, or someone who you think might be morally objectionable with their goals. Give someone too much confidence, and they become the next Elon Musk.” Eryn chuckled.

“I said Hitler, but fair modern example.”

She chuckled again, and then tilted her head in serious contemplation. “It’s still always up to the person themselves to make their own decision on where they draw the line in life and business with what’s morally right to them. We can choose who we coach, and what methods we use, but if you give them the tools to become more powerful in how they advance their career, you can’t blame yourself if they take that a dark direction. It’s still their life. Still their decision. Wow!” She playfully smacked my shoulder. “I think you just came up with a whole new thesis!”

“Yeah...” I tried to chuckle too, grim as I actually found it.

“Is this about Avi?”

“What?” I snapped to Eryn with far fiercer attention.

“It’s kind of always been about Avi, hasn’t it?”

I’d mentioned before how brilliant she is, yeah? Now I had to wonder if she knew we had horns.

She touched my arm gently, comforting. “You’ve been a good influence on him. He’s more confident, more outgoing, but also, at least the past few days, he’s been a little... rough around the edges? Sharper-tongued and even a little smug?”

Dicking down could do that to a person.

Only Avi also talked more about how maybe he *would* try to change the world with his newfound royalty, depending on what Mummy Dearest wanted when all this ended, and they could build something beautiful together. *We* could build something beautiful.

Which would have sounded amazing if I didn’t know better than to believe those words would mean anything but a slow descent right back to Hell, just Hell on Earth too.

“You’re thinking it’s your fault,” Eryn said. “That a little negative is slipping into the positive.”

It was my fault. I’d encouraged him to take his first slice with his claws.

But if I hadn’t, he’d be dead.

“He just isn’t used to it, is all,” Eryn continued when I sat there staring, “and he’s trying to figure this new him out. If you’re worried, you should talk to him about it. You two are so good together, and with how much I know you care about him, he’ll want to listen, even if it’s a difficult conversation.”

Bloody human emotions making my eyes feel hot, all because my sweet mate was saying sweet words to console me without a personal agenda. I even thanked her and *meant* the words. Not sure it helped our project on self-sabotage, but I guess sometimes ya might want to fail.

If ya found something better.

My mobile buzzed just as the bells chimed. Avi had texted me:

Let’s skip Ethics. Meet you by that big oak tree behind the senior dorms?

Skip ethics indeed.

I texted back:

See ya there, love.

Perfect place for a confession. Or an execution.

Some bloke tripped on his way out the door, which reminded me of my first meeting with Avi and the very different person he'd been only weeks prior. I parted with Eryn before we'd even left our chairs, saying I had a different route to take today, and coulda sworn ol' Brenty-boy would have stopped me for a chat if girlfriend Kristen hadn't barged in to intercept.

Bye-bye, Brenty. I waved, as he got accosted for whatever foul up his phone had caused. On my way out the building, I sidestepped a barrage of personal effects that had spilled out of some girl's bag, another pair having an argument, this time about a misplaced calculator or some rubbish, and someone grouching about having a tear in their new shirt. As if any of those problems were as big as what I was about to deal with.

It was nearing the bitter cold stage of late autumn into early winter, so I had a wool coat on for appearances' sake and thought the overcast sky might mean anything between rain, sleet, or snow. The idea of shagging Avi or being shagged up against that oak tree under a halo of snowflakes was possibly the most romantic thing I'd ever stupidly entertained.

It *would* be romantic. Picturesque. Upping the budget, if ya will, from porno to tasteful independent film. Assuming it didn't end with a splatter of red on white. Or at least more red than I usually enjoyed.

My trek to the tree would be faster cutting through the music building, so cut I did, where I didn't realize Fry must have had a class or had also chosen to cut through here, until I spotted him on a corner bench—where he was holding his mobile in both hands, gawking at it as if looking right through it.

“Penny for yer thoughts? Or possibly a fiver?”

“Huh?” Fry looked up with reddened eyes.

That pesky lurch in my gut had me sitting before I thought better of it. “Lookin’ a bit bleak for the day before turkey day. Ain’t ya Yanks s’pposed to be thankful or somethin’?”

“Not much to be thankful about. My parents are separating.”

Fuck. Full sentences even. And not nice ones. “Rough go there, mate. Sorry to hear.”

“My mom called yesterday,” Fry went on, saying more words in one sitting than I’d heard the entirety that I’d known him. “I haven’t told Eryn yet. I thought it would blow over, turn out to be some stupid fight, but Mom kicked him out of the house, and I just learned why. She caught him cheating with his secretary like in a movie from the 50s or something.”

Pretty sure that happened plenty in modern day too, but I didn’t say so. “Still going home tomorrow?”

Fry turned his mobile to me with a text from his mum saying:

No reason we can’t have a normal Thanksgiving, just me, you, and your sister.

“Thinking it’s not gonna be normal,” I stated the obvious.

“Nope. *Fuck.*” Fry sniffed back what were obvious tears. “You don’t think your parents are going to split up after you’re grown. Which is stupid to think, I know. Anyone can split up at any time for whatever reason, but like... they’re my parents, and I’m an adult, and they’re supposed to be together forever, not another failed marriage because my dad’s a creep.”

“Doesn’t have to mean he’s a creep. *Might.*”

Fry chuckled, which was what I’d hoped for.

“Ya don’t know the details, yeah?” I went on. “Could be any number of reasons why it happened. People make mistakes. Fall out of love. Never really loved someone the way they thought to begin with...”

I could tell my pep talk was not having nearly the calming effect Eryn’s had had on me, given Fry’s face was growing

redder, and an actual tear slipped down his cheek.

“I can shut up any time now.”

“No! I appreciate it. Really. Maybe it’s selfish, but as much as I’m crushed about my folks splitting, for me and for them, all I can think about is... Eryn. I love her so much. If my parents can split after almost thirty years...”

“Hey now.” I nudged Fry’s shoulder. “Yer not yer folks. No one can know the future, but you and Eryn, yer...” It wasn’t too hard to think back on the previous weekend. Sorta stuck in my head already. “Ya just fit. And hey, if turkey day’s a bust, I’m sure Avi and his pops wouldn’t mind a fourth. When I got the invite, I promised to make the unhealthiest pumpkin pie ever conceived by man.”

Fry sniffled. “I live four hours away.”

“Got cream cheese and beer in it.”

“I might drive back for that.”

We both laughed.

“Ya know...” I nudged him again. “I dig the strong silent act and all, but yer not so bad to talk to when ya get yer words out.”

“I don’t always have something to say.” He shrugged.

That was actually quite profound.

“Thanks,” Fry said and turned to wrap his arms around me, *hugging* me. “I’m really glad you and Avi met.”

There came that lurch again, but a... good one? Could a lurch in one’s gut feel good? Was Jiminy Cricket still kickin’ down there despite my best attempts to suffocate the bugger?

Because it did feel good to make another feel good, and I hugged Fry back. Emotions might be annoying, but better than anything I’d known in Hell. If I went back to rule, I’d just become one of the masters I’d always hated. But if I stayed, I had to prevent Avi from becoming something worse.

Bloody smear in the snow, here I come.

“I’m going to see if Eryn wants to skip her next class,” Fry said as he released me, still holding his phone. He started to dial her number, and I checked mine too.

Lucky me—unlucky for everyone else maybe—Avi had texted something new.

Change of plans. Meet me in the parking lot. I feel a tear.

Shit.

A backpack strap snapped while a bloke was walking past us, spilling its contents all over the floor like that girl’s handbag.

And the bloke who’d tripped.

And the arguing couples.

And the torn shirt.

And the literal disaster today had been for everyone I’d encountered.

Which meant I knew who the next avatar would be and didn’t even look at Fry before I bolted.

Wrath.



“OOF.” I barreled into someone, nearly losing my grip on my recently replaced phone. I’d been trying to read Marc’s reply, but this asshole could have been watching their path too.

I shoved whoever it was when they didn’t so much as excuse themselves, and the obvious freshman went red in the face like he might start screaming.

“Stop!” he howled at his phone when it blasted that bicycle song from Queen, like it kept going off randomly or

something, and then he stormed off to take out his frustrations elsewhere.

Smart. I was too hyped at the thought of the next avatar to be patient if he'd stupidly tried picking a fight.

“Dermot! Wait up!”

Speaking of stupid.

“No time, Brent.” I didn't even look at him, just kept heading for the parking lot. I was almost there, only a few paces to go down the other side of the hill, already past the oak tree where I'd wanted to meet Marc.

Maybe that's where we'd have our victory fuck, hidden but dangerously close to getting caught like we'd been in the alley.

The tree was also the subject of the first drawing I'd ever done for Brent.

“I'll walk with you.” He jogged up beside me, clutching a shoulder bag, and sounding winded, like he'd spotted me from afar and ran to catch up. “You know, walk and talk?”

“I have nothing to say to you.” I shoved my phone into my pocket and continued forward, soon reaching the edge of the first parked cars. No one was out here during class, but once those ended, there'd be a mad rush to escape for Thanksgiving break.

We needed to kill the avatar before then. It was close. Already here. The tear must have happened earlier, and it was lying in wait. A boiling eagerness and fury were building in my gut, and I didn't need Brent distracting me.

It was here. But where? This parking lot was huge, packed with hundreds of cars, and took just as long to cross as the entirety of campus up the hill. It was also thankfully hidden by being behind the athletics center, with no windows looking down on the otherwise barren view of pavement and empty vehicles.

I felt like I could sense the avatar all around me, behind every car and—

“Two seconds.” Brent ignored my dismissal, opening his bag, but I wasn’t interested in him trying to shove more money at the problem of me knowing his dirty secret.

“Go away,” I snarled—and spotted Marc cresting the hill behind us. Good.

“I’ve been a dick, okay? I get it—”

“*Do you?*” I snapped my attention back to Brent and tossed my backpack to the ground, ready for the coming fight. Ready for whatever fight might start between us, too, because Brent wasn’t getting the hint and leaving like he needed to. “Do you get what a fucking hypocrite you were, grinning and using me for three years when you were struggling just as much?”

“I do!” He backed away but was still reaching into his bag. “I’m trying to make up for—”

“Get out of here! Now!”

“Two seconds! So I can give you—”

“I don’t need to be paid off!” I shoved Brent like I’d shoved that freshman, and he knocked into the tailgate of someone’s truck with so much force, he hissed from the pain I felt vindicated in causing him. The piece of paper he’d been taking out of his bag tore, leaving half of it clutched in his hand.

And splitting in two the handsome face of a man with horns, sharp teeth, and a body crafted from bone.

My original drawing. The first, almost depiction of Marc that Brent used for that poster and never gave back to me. He’d ruined it. He’d fucking ruined it.

“I was trying to give it back to you!” Brent said, wide-eyed in response to how my fists clenched. “I forgot about it! Then I found it in my closet. I must have hallucinated you looking like the drawing because I’d seen so much of it that day, what with all the posters.”

“The poster you *made me* give you. That you tried to get for free. Again.”

“I paid you!”

“You bullied and used me and think you can just make up for it because you’re worried I’ll tell everyone you’re poor and struggling like me. You have no idea what real struggle looks like. But maybe you should.”

“Avi!”

I could see it; how much better Brent’s face would look bloody and broken.

“Avi, stop!”

I reared back my fist—

Only for my swing to be caught, hot with hellfire, in Marc’s palm.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“W hadda ya think yer doing?” I pushed Avi away from Brent, shaking out my hand that stung and sizzled, but was better than Brent losing half his face and dying from the shock.

That I gave two shits whether Brent lived or died stunned me, but I was more horrified that Avi didn’t. The fist I’d caught made my own hand hurt, *burn*, because Avi had infused his hellfire into that punch, and if it had connected with Brent’s jaw, he would have lost it.

Avi would have killed him.

“You’re siding with *Brent*?” Avi fired back at me, ready for a brawl. Hungry for it.

“I’m not siding with anyone,” I said more quietly, “but ya don’t want to hurt some fragile human.”

“Maybe I do.” His eyes flashed brighter; pupils gone slit.

“*Avriel*,” I said with purpose, and blessedly—ha, *blessedly*—Avi’s eyes turned normal, and he looked startled like he should. “No. Ya don’t.”

“What the—ah!”

We whipped toward the truck just in time to see the last of Brent yanked underneath it, his bag and what looked like two halves of the drawing Avi had given up for that stupid Halloween poster hurled into the air with his departure.

“What the *hell*?” Avi finished Brent’s shout and darted back to the truck bed. But Brent was gone, no sign of him even

when we crouched to look under. “Oh my God.... Oh my God, Brent!”

I hauled Avi to his feet before the panic could settle. “Ya were closer when ya said *hell*. It’s Wrath.”

“Wrath?”

“Because their tribe can...?” I hinted.

“Cause bad luck. Oh shit. Shit!”

“And frustrate everyone right off their damn rockers, apparently.” Everyone meaning him, and I saw the twist of remorse on Avi’s face that at least meant he wasn’t completely without pity.

No remorse or pity. That’s what I’d promised him.

But that couldn’t be Avi.

That couldn’t be Avi.

“Brent!” Avi cried, worried finally that an innocent he’d once asked me to save was in danger. He sprinted out into the open and spun in a circle, shouting, “Where are you? Brent!”

Giggling reverberated around us as if from the metal of the vehicles themselves.

“Bloody gremlin.” I joined Avi, rotating with him back-to-back to find the source.

More laughter echoed, straight out of the damn eighties movie, as if the creator of *Gremlins* had used Wrath for inspiration.

“Help!” Brent’s cry drew our attention deeper into the lot. “Get it away from me!”

“Is that *Brent*?”

We spun the opposite direction, discovering Eryn and Fry tumbling into the car park from up the hill. They must have followed me.

Shit.

“Help!”

We spun back again, seeing Brent throw himself out from behind a car in a desperate attempt to evade whatever had him, only to be pulled right back out of view.

Avi leapt upward, I feared to unleash his wings, mates behind us to bear witness be damned, but he landed on top of a vehicle still human. “There!” He pointed the next car down and bounded from one to another to give chase.

I leapt onto a row arching ’round the other way rather than tailing him directly in case the avatar changed course. Bounding just as swiftly across vehicles—and hopefully human enough—my third leap landed with my heel catching on the dent of the next one, and my foot flew out from under me.

The back of my head smacked into the car I’d leapt from as I landed between them in spectacular fashion. I hated the wrath tribe. Think a little bad luck’s harmless, try having one of those “when it rains, it pours” days, only forever.

“What is happening?” I heard from Eryn.

“Stay back!” Avi warned.

I lurched to my feet, ignoring the sting in my skull, and zigzagged between cars without risking more acrobatics on top of them. I still banged my knee into one, and cursed wherever the bugger might be—

There! Beneath where Avi was leaping, I saw the scurry of clawed hands and feet, too many sets, all trying to drag Brent in different directions, amidst him screaming and kicking to escape their clutches.

As the limbs I couldn’t see the bodies to yanked Brent under another vehicle, Avi was right on top of it and waited until just when they pulled Brent toward the next one before he dropped into the fray. He landed on one of the vicious thing’s arms—and it vanished in a puff of smoke.

The other arms yanked away as if fleeing independently, leaving Brent a scratched up and bleeding mess of trembling human. Avi yanked him to his feet, all—or maybe only most—animosity gone from him, as he pulled Brent close like a

diminutive protector and ushered him out from between the cars to pass to me.

I passed him to a flustered Eryn and Fry, who'd darted up behind us.

"It *is* Brent!" Eryn sputtered in surprise. "What is—?"

Her bag strap broke, spilling iPad, mobile, and other effects onto the ground.

More giggling. Gremlins indeed, 'cause the blasted things came in packs, and it wasn't one or even a handful but at least a dozen identical scaley Gizmo types that had hopped onto the roofs of the vehicles around us—surrounding us.

Burnt orange rather than the reptile green and brown from the film, they otherwise had the same scales, ape-like proportions, oversized ears, beady eyes, and sharp-toothed smiles that mocked whoever looked at them.

"The *fuck* are those things?" Fry asked in a panic as frenzied as Eryn though possibly less so than Brent, who was staring blankly, like he'd be telling some variation of this to a therapist for the next forty years.

"Any chance ya'd believe there's a gas leak?"

Fry's glasses cracked from the sheer nearness to Wrath's curse field.

Guessing no.

We couldn't blast the buggers without revealing what we were, and I saw the pleading look on Avi's face that we not do that, which I took as a good sign about the state of his fading humanity. But it meant Wrath's multitude was closing in on us, forcing us backward.

Backward—thankfully toward the exit up the hill.

"Go!" Avi told the pair guarding the injured Brent. "Get Brent out of here. *Don't* send help. We got this."

"Avi—" Eryn tried.

"Trust us."

“Are we going to get an explanation later?”

“Probably not,” I said.

She huffed and pointed an accusing finger at us. “Unacceptable! But... urg, fine! Come on, Brent!” She hooked his arm in hers, just as Fry did the same, and they hauled him away at a mad sprint, leaving their abandoned bags, as we formed a wall between them and the advancing hoard.

With the others’ attention finally diverted, Avi bolstered our wall of protection with his first burst of hellfire. It formed a ring of teal flames to keep Wrath from giving chase, and though the creatures cackled and somersaulted between cars behind the flames, they respected its heat and kept their distance.

I glanced up the hill, waiting for the moment when the others disappeared completely, and then shrugged off my humanity, blanketing us in illusion should any early birds seek out their cars.

“Spoilsport!” chanted the gremlins.

“Want the handsome boy for yourself?” one tittered.

“Or feed him to your imp?” said another.

“Like you’ve fed him so much power,” said the next.

“Without knowing what he steals.”

Fuck.

I flew upward, unleashing a rain of hellfire that mixed with Avi’s teal and made his wall grow, becoming a great flickering hedge of purple. Flames licked forward to engulf the nearest gremlin, and it vanished in a poof like the one Avi had stepped on.

Illusions? Or projections, and only one was real.

“So nice of you to feed him,” taunted another.

“So nice,” echoed the rest.

“When he takes more than you.”

“What?” Avi leapt after me, shifting forms as he took to the air.

“Plump with power, your little pet.”

“Or are you his?”

“His,” the rest repeated—and they giggled as they danced behind the flames like demonic school children.

“Marc?” Avi squared off against me instead of our foes. “What are they talking about?”

“Avi...” But whatever I might have said had we met at that oak tree fell from my tongue.

A flash of orange warned us of the coming onslaught, like shrapnel hurling toward us, tiny orbs of blazing-hot death in the form of orange hellfire.

We separated, dodging the orbs, but a couple grazed my arms and legs and sent me sinking to the ground over the edge of our fire wall. I tried to flap up through the pain, but a gremlin jumped to take hold of my ankle and pulled me down. I crashed onto a car, swiping at my attacker with a snarl, and when my claws went through it, they went *through it* and turned the fucker to smoke.

I rolled, avoiding the next gremlin that dove at me from a vehicle over, and landed half on one clawed foot, the other missing actual purchase and slamming my same knee as earlier into a car door. The second gremlin landed behind me and slashed across my wings, earning an eruption from my frustration, as I reeled around and swung out an arc of hellfire wide enough to take out three of them in a line—all smoke.

“You may be stronger,” one said to Avi, who hovered above, as if hesitant to act.

“But the imp’s taken more from the start,” said another.

“To surpass.”

“To ascend.”

“To *betray*.”

“Shut up!” Avi fired his own hellfire, a hotter and wider arc than mine, but not by much.

“Avi—” I tripped over the sag of a flat tire and landed hard on the same fucking knee.

Several gremlins fell upon me, always more, no matter how many disintegrated. They were clawing and biting, like a literal death of a thousand cuts, but any swipe I made proved again that they were not the Wrath we needed, becoming nothing but smoke.

“Avi!” I pleaded to be saved as more descended, and they were obliterated by his next blast. “Please, listen—”

“It was the same, right?” Avi landed past the wall of flames on a car above me. “You’ve always taken the same as me. Right?”

I struggled to my feet. “I didn’t mean—”

“Liar,” they repeated through their ranks, interspersed with giggles, and Avi’s expression twitched with brewing rage.

“Liar!”

“Liar!”

“Liar!”

“Stop!” Avi leapt up and spun in a mad circle, spewing hellfire down amongst the cars to take as many out as he could, nearly taking me out with them, and I had to duck and run for cover to escape.

“Avi!”

They leapt for him as they had me, dragging him out of the air and piling onto him like a swarm when he fell. He swiped and blasted and burned them, as I tried to reach the car where he’d landed.

All the while they taunted him, “Liar, liar, liar!”

“Shut up!” Avi burst outward an explosion from his core, and all touching him vanished. More appeared as he dropped to the ground and we were finally level, finally facing each

other, but no matter how many attacked him, he kept taking them out with barely a thought.

Because their curse field, their bad luck, didn't affect him. He was too strong. They kept trying to attack, but it was like he could see them coming without looking, with his eyes forever centered on me.

"It's not true," he said, "it's not true," and then burst out another explosion of hellfire that singed edges of my skin and made me back away too.

As the gremlins regrouped, Avi closed his eyes, and everything stilled. The late autumn wind blew slower, the Wrath gremlins paused with curiosity, and this time, when several leapt to launch a new attack, Avi didn't swipe at any of them. He reached for one and captured it around its neck.

The others evaporated.

The one that remained looked scared, and I couldn't blame it, kicking and struggling like a defenseless animal in a predator's grasp. Avi didn't kill it yet, but kept it suspended as he opened his eyes and stalked toward me.

"It's not true. Tell me it's not true."

"Love—"

"Tell me!"

I was wounded, healing, but slower from Wrath's bad luck, no match for Avi on my best day, and definitely not now. Still, I said, "It's true. But I—"

"You lied to me. I can see it now." Avi's gaze turned distant, as if looking through a haze of hindsight premonition, if such a thing existed. "Always a little more. You always took a little more. I didn't notice. You didn't want me to notice. You could have asked." His eyes refocused. "I would have given more to you. I would have given you anything. Why didn't you tell me that's what you wanted?"

"I... I was gonna tell ya. Today."

"No." Avi shook his head. He was squeezing the life out of Wrath, making its oversized orange head look purple.

“Avi, I found that first tear on accident, pure luck, like I told ya. Kismet.”

“A con. You took advantage... like you took advantage of me.”

“Yes, but I swear—”

“You *lied!*”

“Arrgg... urgg...” Wrath gurgled just before its head popped off its shoulders like a dandelion bud, and Avi dropped the rest of the bloody mess to the ground, his expression terrifyingly cold.

“What were you going to do? What were you really planning? Tell me!” He roared again, and moved so fast, I didn’t see the steps or rush forward or beat of his wings, only felt the sudden grip of his bloody hand around my throat, as I gazed into the teal fire of his eyes.

When I couldn’t answer from how he crushed my windpipe, he let up, an awful reminder of Lust when he’d demanded my fealty, and I’d sworn there would never be another.

“*Marchosias,*” Avi rumbled with the worst threat yet, my name, meaning I’d hurt him more than he could bear. “Tell me.”

The orange essence of Wrath was wafting up. Avi didn’t even need to summon it, not consciously, but it swirled around him, wanting to become part of him.

Like I eventually had too.

“I could never match ya, Avi. Not yer strength, not yer power, not even by taking more. It wasn’t ’bout beatin’ ya, just... being strong enough to leave.”

His grip slackened like I’d kicked him in the gut, but I knew reprieve now didn’t mean reprieve completely.

But I couldn’t deny him the whole truth. “If ya’d decided to close the veil, I would have jumped through first. If ya’d decided to let it dissolve and take over Hell with the earth, I

would have jumped through anyway, and reformed it behind me to close ya out. I would have taken over Hell for myself.”

“You... you were just going to leave? You said you loved me.”

“I do—”

“You *lied* to me.” Avi choked off my reply, any excuse I might have rambled. “You lied. You lied, and you stole from me.” His eyes glimmered with so much more than light. They were prisms of different shades of teal and blue and white and *black*, and his fifth horn grew into a brutally sharp fin, all of him sharper, larger, menacing. “I can see it. I can see their energy in you. Their colors combining and giving you power that should have been mine. You stole it. You lied and you stole from me. You lied and you *stole*... so I am taking it all back.”

He kissed me, brutally with a clash of fangs, tearing into my top lip to split it. But when his tongue elongated and delved down my throat, it wasn't to seek mine, but to seek what I'd taken—and there was no comparison for the pain I felt in having the very essence of me drained.

My knees gave out, so much worse than Sloth weakening me, as the differently colored energies from the avatars purged from me like a vomit of rainbows. Avi took it all back. He took more. He took and took until my vision blackened, and I imagined my body like a husk, hollowed and withering, staying upright only because he held me.

I knew now which of the princes was Mummy Dearest. Not Lucifer, Prince of Pride, like many might guess, but the one arch demon capable of coveting and claiming what others had.

The image of the car park cleared as I was lowered to the ground. Avi hadn't killed me.

Yet.

“Envy,” he said, like he'd read the epiphany from my mind. “Of course. Always denied what I wanted, what I'd earned. But I still want. I *want*. And you took advantage of

that too.” He gripped the side of my neck, tilting my head to look at him. I felt so small on the ground, some unknown vehicle at my back, with Avi crouched over me. I must have been smaller, features diminished, claws but the faintest pricks. Even my teeth when I ran my tongue over them felt barely pointed.

“A-Avi... please—”

“No.” He gripped my face tighter, and I felt the heat in his hand increase. “No remorse. No pity. You don’t deserve it. That’s why I’ll let you live. Weak and pathetic like you thought you could leave me.”

I tried to shake my head, to deny that, and to escape the increasing burn from his touch. He was branding me again, and I couldn’t turn from the pain.

Then it stopped. The pain. The heat. Avi lurched back like he’d changed his mind. No marring my pretty face today. With the edges of my vision still darkened, Avi seemed far away, as if down a long tunnel.

“One left,” he said. “Just Pride, and then it’s me and Mom, whatever she wants from me. I don’t need you. I never did, did I? But if I ever see you again...” His eyes flashed, and with everything else so hazy, they were all I could see. “I will kill you.”

He pushed off the ground to fly away, leaving me a heap in the car park.

And the worst part was...

It started snowing.



I LANDED in the backyard at home. I didn’t even care if someone had seen me. I doubted anyone had. The snow had gotten thick by the time I was flying over anywhere with people below me. There was a good coating over the grass, but

I didn't feel the cold, barely even the dampness as my claws touched down.

I was thrumming, so ripe with power, I felt invisible. This was what it was supposed to be. This was what I was supposed to feel. I was a king. I was the one intended for the avatars' energy. It was never meant to be given, to be stolen, to be... shared, like something we could have had together. We could have ruled together.

But Marc never wanted me enough to stay.

I turned human as I unleashed a punch into the back siding of my house, still more than enough to take a chunk out of the vinyl.

I hit it again.

And again.

And *again*.

“Avriel? What are you doing?”

I gasped to hear my dad's voice, to hear my *name*, which had become something Marc and I used only to say we'd gone too far.

He'd gone too far.

And so had my lying father.

“You knew!” I snarled as I whirled on him coming out the back door. He let it slam with a startle of his own, but I didn't stop. “You knew. You knew I was a demon, a half-breed, the fucking Antichrist in the making, and that Mom was a demon too. You *knew* I was the son of an arch demon. Admit it!”

Whatever I'd expected of Dad's reaction if I finally confessed, it wasn't a defeated sigh. “I knew. I know what you are. But it's not because of your mother.”

“What?”

Then my dad shed the lie that he had ever been human.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was as seamless as watching Marc transform or seeing it in myself. The dad I'd known my whole life melted away, leaving behind something like the largest and most formidable of the avatars but so much grander.

Some parts of him looked like me, the way his armor formed, the scales that appeared, though where I was teal, my dad was jewel-toned emerald with copper accents fading to the whites, grays, and black. His dark blond hair with bits of gray became as pure white as mine as a demon, but longer, flowing, with a slightly reptilian face, elongated but still almost human, even with a white beard, teasing the reddishness from his normal self.

But none of this was normal, seeing my father's eyes go slit, blazing green, his claws massive, with larger horns than mine, though only four, missing the fifth I'd grown like a shark fin. Two came from his forehead, arching up and outward, the others set farther back and coiling higher. His wings were nearly identical to mine, spurred and batlike, save the color again, and that he had four of those too, the lower pair slightly smaller than the sheer mass of the top.

The biggest change, at least compared to me, was that his feet didn't grow into raptor talons, but disappeared completely, as he rose twice my demon height on a snake-like tail.

"You're... y-you're..."

"Leviathan," he spoke in a deep rumble, "Prince of Envy."

I couldn't think to change and show him how I looked. "Then Mom..."

“Died, Avriel. Tragically. I never lied about that.” He slithered forward like the serpent half of him was, like his face partially looked too, and reached to hold my face as if nothing had changed, even though everything had changed. “Humans can be so frail, and she fought so hard. She hung on as long as she could to make sure you were safely brought into this world. Not because of some plans I once had, but because we loved each other. We loved you. I love you so much, just like I loved her.”

I should have been angry, and I was, I *was*, but it felt somehow less lonely, less like everything I thought I’d gained for myself had been taken away, to rest my face in my dad’s hand. “But you... you work at the plant,” I said lamely. “We’ve always struggled for everything we had.”

“I’m the arch demon of *envy*,” Dad repeated, smiling a little, and showing the rows of fangs in his maw that would have terrified me a month ago. “It’s in my nature to want everything others have. When I chose your mother over any destiny or power, I knew I had to keep my life simple and small, or I’d be a demon here like I was in Hell. Turned out I like living a simple life, but I am so sorry if that meant things were hard for us at times.”

He’d... let things be hard for us, I realized. He’d allowed it, done nothing, when he could have taken anything we might have wanted or needed without me ever having to know struggle.

I pulled from his grasp, nearly slipping on the snow, thick enough between us as it continued to fall that our neighbors wouldn’t see the snake-man in our backyard even if they were looking.

“You’re a liar. You’re both *liars*.”

“Both?” Dad questioned, and then demanded without pausing, “What did Marc do?”

“You knew about him too?”

“That he’s an imp of lust?” Dad morphed human, becoming *Nathan* again in a ballcap and flannel. “Of course, I

knew. I can hide my presence, but no imp could hide from me. I was surprised when you introduced me to him, but I thought, maybe, like your mother, you saw something in a demon that I couldn't."

"No." I shook my head, feeling tears burn my eyes that I was so angry at for pooling. "He lied. He was just using me to get enough power to take Hell for himself and leave me behind."

"I am so sorry, Avriel. Then you...?"

"I left him alive," I guessed what he'd meant to ask. "He'd been taking more of the avatars' energy each time, so I took it all back. You knew about them too." It all felt like a slap, like a sham, that my dad had known the horrors I was going through, even if I had grown to enjoy some of it. "You knew everything I was facing."

"The avatars weren't something I could prevent, but I believed you could handle them. I was still always vigilant, attuned to you if you were in danger you couldn't overcome. But you were always going to be stronger than me eventually, and Marc taught you well, even if his goals weren't what you'd hoped."

What I'd hoped for was a simple life too, but a happy one, with my art, and my friends, and someone who'd love me, without feeling like I was a speck in the universe who didn't matter. Marc had given me that, made me feel larger than myself, special, so much more so than any power or changes in the way I could look.

And it hadn't meant anything.

The tears steamed as they fell onto my cheeks, hot from anger and unfair grief, but meeting cold air with the falling snow to crystalize them. I wanted to fly back to that parking lot and tear Marc into pieces, but I also... wanted...

"I am so sorry, Avriel," Dad said again, approaching slowly to cover the space I'd put between us. "I didn't interfere because I wanted you to choose for yourself. Maybe that was the wrong answer, but I worried if I told you, you'd

either assume you should be like me and stay human because I'd chosen to be human or think you should wreak havoc on the earth because I was once a prince of Hell.

"Either way, it would have been what I am influencing who you should be, and I didn't want to put you through that. I am so sorry if instead I made it all worse."

My tears fell harder like I was drowning, and I couldn't get any words out. I just wanted Dad to hold me, and as soon as I looked at him with my face contorting from how I was sobbing, he knew what I needed, like he always knew, and swept forward to pull me against him.

I bawled in his arms like I hadn't since I was five years old.

I wanted to wipe everyone like Brent off the planet.

I wanted to protect Brent because he'd felt ostracized like me and had even tried to make up for being awful, and I'd almost murdered him for it.

I wanted to remake the world into something like my drawings.

I wanted to keep my art for me and never tell someone what their ideal world should look like.

I wanted to be recognized and worshiped.

I wanted to hide.

I wanted to feel powerful.

I wanted to let myself be engulfed by someone else and be okay with feeling small, like how Dad, only the tiniest bit bigger than me, still made me feel safe.

I wanted to fly back to that parking lot and tear... Marc...

I wanted *Marc*.

I wanted Marc to still love me.

"I don't know... what to do anymore, Dad."

"It's okay." He stroked the back of my head and held me tighter. "You're not supposed to know everything at twenty-

one.”

I laughed through the fall of my tears. “Most twenty-one-year-olds aren’t destined to end the world.”

“You’re not destined to end the world. You’re destined, like everyone else, to have a choice in who you want to be and what you want to do with the power you’re given. *And* the power you take. Who and what you are, who you think you need to be, doesn’t need to match up if that isn’t what you want. Whatever you choose, I’ll support you. I’ll be here. Because my choice was you.”

I sniffled through the fresh stream of tears from hearing him say that, soaking his shirt. It was all I would have asked from him, even though I said, “I’m still mad.”

He chuckled, like a dad, like my dad, not some prince of Hell, some arch demon of a sin always seen as selfish. He was the opposite, he was the virtue, because instead of envy, he’d chosen to be kind. “You can be mad,” he said. “As old as I am, I don’t always make the right decisions. But having you and choosing your mom, even though I lost her, isn’t something I would ever regret.

“Now, come on.” He petted my head again and gave me a final squeeze, before looping an arm around my waist to lead me inside. “Let’s get out of the snow. You can tell me about everything I missed, and I can tell you the truth about me and your mom.”

That was something I really looked forward to hearing.



I SANK against the door to my flat, vision tunneling like it had been since I’d hobbled to my feet and braved the snow.

Don’t know how I managed to fly through the start of a blizzard without tumbling out of the sky, but I’d known if I tried walking to my flat, I’d never make it. Even keeping the

illusion of my human self once I landed was a struggle. I mostly succeeded, but my fingernails were pointed when I turned the knob to stumble inside.

Once I was in, I let the illusions fall away. I was definitely smaller. Having lost the avatars' energy and most of my own, I was like the demonling Avi had first manifested into, with smaller wings and horns and human feet.

Adorably pathetic, and I'd done it to myself.

I'd somehow managed to keep my mobile and dropped it onto my nightstand as I collapsed into bed. The screen was blinking. A new message. I knew it wasn't from Avi but looked anyway.

It was from Eryn.

What's happening? Are you two okay? Is it over?
What were those things? Brent won't tell us anything.

Good boy, Brenty. No spilling the beans on those hallucinations you've been having, eh?

I couldn't be bothered to answer with more than:

Later. But safe.

Which was true, even if I felt like death, and part of me longed for it. Why couldn't I have told Avi sooner? Why'd he have to be so bloody enchanting, enough that I doomed myself because I'd rather love him, even if he hates me now, than continue a plan that would have given me all I once thought I wanted?

I'd know soon enough what he'd make of this world and what later fate he might have in mind for me, but for now, all I could manage was closing my eyes, and cursing that even there I saw Avi's face.



AN ANNOYING BLINKING ROUSED ME, and I swiped out my hand to dismiss it.

The swipe knocked my mobile to the floor, but it landed face up, even brighter from my finger having brushed the screen to wake it from sleep mode. The light was bright because the rest of my room was darker now. The snowstorm had worsened, or it was simply nighttime, and I hadn't turned on any lights when I came home.

Opening my eyes and trying to sit up, I felt worse, not helped by the flood of memory, replaying the pain and anger I'd seen on Avi's face before he drained me. What an idiot I was, letting it all unravel. He might have listened, might have forgiven me if he'd heard it from me first, but I'd been afraid and so unsure.

I was sure now.

But I'd fucked it all up, and he wouldn't be Avi for much longer.

My barely pointed claws looked like press-on nails for a Halloween party, as I reached over the bed to claim my blinking mobile. More texts from Eryn, all basically restating her previous concerns from hours earlier, only now including how worried she was that Avi wasn't answering texts either.

Even Fry had messaged:

Let us know you're okay.

Eryn had half a mind to check on Avi at home, she'd written, only hindered by the snow. Since I'd never told either of them about my flat, she'd added:

Where do you stay anyway?

I had to answer, if only to ensure they didn't check on an Avi who didn't want to be checked. In as human terms as possible, I explained that we'd had a fight. More like blow-out, goodbye forever, but they needn't worry about the creatures from the car park. Feral cats, doncha know, hairless kind, nothing odd. All the rest would be better after the storm.

Lying was easier.

Why wasn't lying easier?

A teardrop landed on the back of my hand, as I stared at my mobile and their immediate answers that they were there if I needed them. Stand-up mates. The best. Which Avi deserved, and I sure as *fuck* didn't.

Another drop fell. And another. God damn Jiminy Cricket. Fucking blighter could go right back where I came from.

I threw the phone onto my nightstand, and the way it skittered cast its light on the wall, where I'd plastered that map of Vale and pricked a few pins, marking where the avatars had appeared to look for consistencies and clues.

And to distract me after I'd doubted my plan.

I wiped the tears from my face and staggered to my feet. I didn't teeter, much as I felt awful and weak like I could go right back to sleep. I took a pin from the bowl on the nightstand and pricked one into the campus car park with a bitter shove. Five down, one to—

Oh, fucking *end me*.

It was a star, a pentagram upside down. That was the shape formed from the display of pins even without strings connecting them. It stood to reason then that the last avatar would appear at the nexus in its center.

In the chapel in the heart of campus.

My mobile's screen darkened from inactivity, drawing my eyes to it. The dimmer display showed only the date and time: November 22nd, nine o'clock.

Forty-two minutes until twenty-one days since Avi turned twenty-one.

That's when it would happen, and now I knew where. The universe liked a pattern. No waiting days or weeks or even an hour from now. The final avatar was coming tonight, and the only person who could warn Avi about it was me.

Emotions really were the worst.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Avi looked good. He always did to me, but even with the whites of his eyes a bit red, like mine might have looked too, that boy in a Henley and jeans was a feast. I was grateful to find him at home—even if his expression turned murderous upon seeing me on his porch.

“Wait.” I wedged my foot in the door before he could slam it on me. “I know where the last avatar’s gonna show up, and probably when. I just wanna help. If ya still want me to leave or to slice my head off after I tell ya, so be it.”

Avi’s expression hardened, eyes flickering between rounded and slit pupils, but he settled on human as he stared me down. “If you think you can try anything—”

“Pretty sure a stiff breeze could blow me away ’bout now.” I raised my hands in good faith. “And did a few times on the walk over. I’m no threat to ya.”

“It isn’t only me you have to worry about,” he said as he opened the door.

The second I stepped over the threshold, I felt that something was different.

“Marchosias, is it?” Avi’s father was at the table, nursing a cuppa, easy as ya like, but emanating an aura that stopped me in my tracks.

I glanced at Avi. “What—” But as soon as my eyes flicked back to *Nathan Dermot*, that sure as shit wasn’t who I saw.

The green and copper magnificence of a prince of Hell with four wings, four horns, and the body of a massive snake

scared me to my core, and I knocked into the closed door at my back with a lurch.

“Y-yer...”

“Leviathan,” Avi answered.

“Ha.” I tried to smile off my terror as I looked again at Avi, but his coldness was almost as terrifying as his father’s. Never in my life had I been in the presence of such power. It would have sent me to my knees in humble supplication, like it had many times before, if I hadn’t fucked everything so much and knew Avi didn’t want me there. “Guessed right on the Envy part, eh?”

Proud Papa was back to human when I glanced at him next, but I could feel the presence of who he really was that he no longer tried to hide from me. “I’d remind you to call me Nathan, but I don’t think that invitation is open anymore.”

I was so gonna die here.

“Dad told me everything.” Avi headed back to the table where his own cuppa waited. Neither offered one to me, but I’d take the lack of claws through my chest. “He’d planned exactly what you thought my mom did, to come here, have me, take over. But he really loved my mom. He loved being here. More than he expected.” Avi sat, but I kept my pace slow as I followed to approach the table of powerhouses.

“I know the feeling,” I said.

“Only *he* wasn’t lying,” Avi snapped. “He told my mom the truth. She really did die having me, but... it was just a horrible thing that happened, not part of any plan. Even the story he’d always told me about where they met was true.”

“Lemme guess—chapel on campus, where yer pops first hopped over?”

They both turned to me in surprise.

“Where do ya think Pride’s comin’ through? And the when is in about forty-five minutes. Same time, twenty-one days ago, as when the avatar of *Envy* first showed up on the scene.”

“That doesn’t seem like something worth lying about,” Nathan said.

“He isn’t,” Avi responded. “I can feel it. It’s so much larger than the other tears. Not open yet but growing. I wouldn’t have been able to pinpoint where it was if...” He pursed his lips, not wanting to admit I’d been helpful.

“Then we better get there and make sure the chapel’s empty.” Nathan got up, pulling his car keys from his pocket. I won’t say it wasn’t humbling to know this was Leviathan, while seeing him in jeans, a flannel, and a trucker hat.

“Faster to fly,” I said, as they moved past me for the door. “Snow’s letting up, but I can shield us so no one sees. Still got enough juju for that.” I wiggled my fingers when Avi looked back at me.

“You think I’d let you—”

“Please. I’m too weak to do much else. Let me help.”

“Why? So you can find a way to take Pride’s energy and run?” His voice cracked, raw from hours of grieving and discoveries I barely knew the start of. I’d caused the grieving part, and I tried to take some solace in that it was a good thing Avi could be hurt, that he could mourn, that he still had enough of a heart to be broken.

“I wasn’t gonna go through with it.”

“Right,” Avi huffed.

“I was gonna tell ya the truth. I was gonna stay. I was gonna convince ya to throw out yer own plan, so we could just... be.”

He turned his back on me, but I grabbed his arm, even if the way he wrenched out of my hold made me hold my breath for a blow I wouldn’t survive.

“Ya almost killed Brent,” I reminded him, and his answering expression looked pinched with shame. Nathan gaped, knowing who Brent was but not yet that. He worked with Brent’s father after all. Probably knew Brent worked

there too, and just never thought to mention it. “I know ya didn’t really want to hurt him, Avi.”

“I did. But I... didn’t.” Avi clenched his eyes shut and they looked wet when he sprang them open. “I don’t know what I want anymore, but I know I can’t trust you.” His gaze sharpened, the red and wetness banished with his glare that spoke of the depth I’d wounded him. “I don’t forgive you.”

He joined Nathan, but when Nathan opened the door, Avi waited for me to join them too. That was something, though maybe only because flying with me to veil us was smarter than taking a truck.

“Didn’t think ya would,” I said.



LEVIATHAN WAS like a fucking dragon in the sky, brilliant to behold like little boy imp Marchosias would have swooned over in my youth. Bit less brilliant when I knew the grand Prince of Envy likely wanted to see me splattered on the pavement. He held back for Avi’s sake, I imagined. Or maybe because he truly had gone native and wanted to remain more human.

Like I did.

Funny how clear one’s wants were when all the options were gone.

The chapel was empty, the hour late, but the door was open, never locked. We locked it behind us once we got inside to prevent any bystanders from stumbling upon the horror show to follow. I’d half expected Avi to push me out the door first, but he hadn’t.

I’d never been in the chapel myself, but it was nice enough. Much as I felt ill-fitting in any place of worship, I could appreciate the artistry of stained-glass windows. They lined both sides of the chapel leading to the pulpit, and above

them were parallel rows of what I believe was every country's flag that had a flag to display. The windows depicted the usual stations of the cross, along with other well-known stories from the bible and a few saintly figures. I knew my lore and recognized that one of the windows at the back displayed St. Ignatius, who the college was named for, a pious priest type looking heavenward.

All I knew of Heaven was in the petite form of the king-to-be who wouldn't look at me.

The tear felt like it was forming all around us, but there was nothing visible, no way to be sure where it would start. We searched every corner, every pew and crevice, but none of us—not that I expected much from me with how weak I was—could tell exactly where Pride would cross over.

We were soon down to a single-digit span of minutes before all Hell would literally break loose, and the fight with the final avatar could mean the end of the world as we knew it, regardless of who won. Still, we scavenged, unable to stand still while we waited. When I wandered closer to Avi, and for the first time, he didn't dart away from me, I felt like Nathan purposely turned for the farthest corner to give us a moment.

Good bloke, that Arch Demon of Envy. Never thought I'd say that sentence before tonight.

“So...” I tried to at least share some words with Avi before this ended. There were risers set up behind the pulpit for a choir, and I trailed behind Avi in front of the first row. “Ya don't know anymore what ya gonna do after it's over? Having learned it's all on you and not yer mum? Pops doesn't seem to have an opinion.”

“His *opinion* is he wants me to be happy before he wants anything for himself.” Avi turned his head over his shoulder but still didn't look at me. “You know, the way it's supposed to be when you love someone.”

“I was gonna tell ya,” I tried again. Then more emphatically when Avi grimaced. “I *was*. If we'd met at that tree, I was gonna tell ya everything. Part of me wanted to tell ya from week one. Bloody week one! When I was still an

arsehole out for myself, one week with you had me wanting to stay. I was s'posed to be tempting *you*, not you me."

He shook his head. "I actually believed it when you said you liked serving."

"I did, just not when it was all I was, and my masters could have cared less if I was replaced with someone else."

"I wouldn't have replaced you."

"I know that. And what can I say, ya made some lasting impressions." I lifted the hem of my shirt and tugged down my jeans a touch to display the scars he'd branded me with.

At last, Avi looked. He turned to face me and stared, at first with a scrunch to his brow, confused, and then with dawning horror. "What are those?"

"From the alley. Gray Friday Sales," I added cheekily.

"You're faking that. Using your illusions. Those wouldn't be visible when you're human. You're making me think they're there."

"Am I? Used up my last juju, remember? I can barely hold this form right now." I knew he had to sense that, even without me splaying one of my hands to show the prick of my nails like the start of claws. "Didn't wanna scare ya by showing ya these sooner. Or encourage ya." I chuckled and moved toward him. "It's the somewhere in between where I think the real you lives, Avi. Little bit o' dark. Little bit o' light. Who knew I had some light in me, eh? Or just a penchant for high fat coffee and Greek pizza. Oh, and adorable Christian Slater types."

Avi ducked from my touch when I tried to reach for him.

I dropped my hand, wishing I could know one more time what touching and tasting him was like, with or without a sharing of blood and come and debauchery. "I know I hurt ya, and I am so sorry, even if ya never believe that. Whatever ya decide—take over here, take over there, take over both, none of the above—I hope yer happy too. I mean that." I pushed forward, one more step, and reached for him again, I had to, and Avi sucked in a breath when I cupped his cheek. He

wanted to believe me, I could tell, just like I wanted... I just... wanted...

Him.

“Ya can believe me, Avi, ’cause I got nothin’ left to lose. Especially since I’m not gonna be much use in this fi—”

Oh.

Nine forty-two, was it?

’Cause my words cut off, cut right from my tongue, and I couldn’t finish them, couldn’t breathe, not with the tear having opened behind me, and Pride shoving a sword through my chest.



“MARC!”

I swept my arm after him, as Marc was lurched away from me, his hand torn from my face, and body whipped back behind the creature that had skewered him. He didn’t fly across the chapel into a wall or stained-glass window, but back inside the tear, into the gaping wound that had opened like a portal, straight into Hell.

Hell, which I could see for the first time, as Pride crossed over.

I don’t know what part of Hell I was looking at—Vegas, Amsterdam, Mines of Moria, or medieval slave market, but it looked exactly like Marc had described. It was the Upside Down of Vale, right here on campus, as if looking through a mirror universe that had... gone to Hell.

The hill I was used to being covered in grass and trees and limestone buildings, was barren and black with twisted replacements, more gothic and topped by spires. Embers danced in the air like above a bonfire, but from fissures in the

land itself, not to heat or lava, just power flowing beneath the ground—or corruption, or both, in varied colors.

It was beautiful.

It was terrible.

It was both, and I didn't know which I believed more or what I wanted. But Marc was next to one of those fissures, brightened by its casting of violet light over his heaving, fallen form.

My view of him was blocked as Pride stepped closer, and I stumbled back as quickly as I'd heaved forward. Pride was beautiful and terrible too. He looked like an angel, violet and gold. His hair was a black-purple cascade, wings violet too but tipped in the same gold as the armor he wore like some paladin of Hades. His horns curved tall and rounded toward each other, forming an almost halo behind his head. If not for the slits in his violet eyes, I might have taken him for a savior. He even smiled, sheathing the sword he'd pierced through Marc, and speaking gently.

"You have done well, Avriel."

"Lucifer," my dad spoke from my left, changed and pulsing with his own great power as a demonic serpent in the center of the chapel.

"Leviathan," Pride greeted.

"Luci—wait." I shook my head. "You mean... this is the *actual* prince?"

"No," Dad said, "but he is talking through his avatar. Look."

I had to step to the side to see past Pride, and my eyes went to Marc first, struggling to heal the hole in his chest. But then I saw it, saw *him*, beyond the great expanse into the depths of Hell, past legion after legion of angelic demons similar to but smaller than Pride and more eldritch horror like with many eyes and eerily alien proportions. Their figurehead, their prince, looked nearly identical to his avatar, but his long hair was as golden as his armor, and he had four wings like my dad.

And an army between us and him, swiftly approaching Marc.

I darted forward, but a violet wing flapped a great gust at me, knocking me back.

“Let me in!” I transformed like Dad, and for the first time since feeling the combined power of all the avatars, I realized the magnitude I’d grown to in size and strength. I’d known but not appreciated how every part of me was larger, with more spurs on my wings, the fin of my fifth horn as sharp and large as the tallest of the others; and while my eyeteeth might have had the longest length, all were pointed now. My claws could have swiped the plumage of one of Pride’s wings off in one brutal gouge.

I was nearly at my apex, and where Pride’s energy was missing from completing me, I had the excess I’d stolen from Marc, from the core of his demonic spirit.

Which was why he couldn’t heal. Not fast enough. Not enough. He’d changed into a demon too; a ripple of his human self having vanished the moment he landed on Hell’s soil. I was larger, and Marc looked so small, crumpled, vulnerable.

And it was all my fault.

“Marc!” I flapped upward, but Pride beat both wings with a gale-like expulsion to knock me back, where I hit the organ pipes and landed on a pew.

“Avriel!” Dad cried, but Pride boomed over him.

“Your imp needn’t perish, Avriel! By killing the other avatars, you’ve weakened their patrons. That is how you can take over our realm, because those who would oppose you are no longer a match for your power.” He stood so insufferably casual as I kicked aside the pew I’d fallen on and met my father to square up in front of him. “You might be able to defeat my avatar, but my army will devour your lover long before you can save him.”

I opened my mouth only for Pride to boom louder.

“However! Call a truce with me now, and I will spare the imp.”

“Seriously?” I laughed. “So you can take over Hell instead?”

“So I might serve you.” Pride bowed, and I could see Lucifer do the same in the distance. “Rather than weaken like my siblings.”

A devil’s deal, like everything in my life now. An hour ago, I might not even have considered saving Marc from whatever fate he got into, but now... I wanted to believe him. His apologies, his promises, even if they were more lies. I could barely see him, crawling his way to the portal, as the army behind him advanced with sights on him, on *him*, instead of me.

“Avriel,” my father rumbled.

It was strange seeing something so monstrous in his place, something I could have drawn, that I would have thought cool and fascinating and beautiful if there hadn’t been so much grief connected to today’s discoveries, and so much uncertainty in which me I wanted to become.

“Whatever you decide, *whatever* you decide,” Dad repeated, “I’m with you. But believe me when I tell you, you can never trust what a demon says... until they’ve known humanity.”

Like him.

And Marc.

And fuck it, I wasn’t losing either of them.

“If any of your army touches my imp,” I warned Pride, warned Lucifer speaking through him, with my hellfire growing in my palms and claws flexing, “I am taking your head after I take your avatar’s.”

I launched forward, blazing hands outstretched, and clutched Pride’s shoulder and the side of his face, intending to burn his flesh until I could wrench his head from his shoulders like so many others.

Nothing happened.

The angel I'd attacked changed forms, but not into an oozing puddle like I'd hoped. He shifted, losing the guise of angelic beauty for his feathered wings to become like blades, face morphing into something unsettling, many-eyed and elongated like the distant army. Where his skin should have sizzled, it stitched back together faster than I could burn, and he grinned a multi-fanged smile before flinging me across the chapel with a flex of both wings to dislodge me.

I landed on the same pew I'd fallen on before, now tilted, hitting my ribs on its overturned backrest. By the time I sprang up, Pride had re-drawn his sword, parrying a blow from my dad's tail whipping at him like a lash. The armored tail clanged against the sword's metal and ricocheted back.

"Perhaps you are not as strong as I feared," Pride sneered at us.

"We're killing him," I said to Dad, "and getting Marc back."

"As you say." Dad swung his tail again.

I soared up to attack from above as Pride defended against my dad's assault. This avatar was stronger than the others. They'd always gotten stronger, but I'd grown stronger too. I'd always won, and this time would not be different.

I concentrated a beam of teal hellfire at Pride, but he evaded Dad's attacks, and brought his other arm up like a shield—where an actual shield extended out of his forearm made of glowing violet light. His teeth had multiple rows like a shark now, as he roared in triumph at my hellfire bowing around him like a downpour over an umbrella. His six eyes glowed, with extra wings extending from his head, as his bladed wings lashed out at Dad like weapons. *All* of Pride was a weapon.

"Together!" I shouted, and Dad knew I needed his hellfire too.

Emerald-green, Dad's fire shot past the spill of mine to cut through the extension of Pride's sword, and finally, I started to see damage made as the fire got through Pride's defenses. His

feathers singed, looking more like feathers again instead of deadly metal.

Then he moved. Pride stalked forward from the elevated area with the pulpit, keeping his shield up to guard from my beam, with his sword out to deflect as much of Dad's as he could. But though it burned him, he still advanced.

Dad slithered backward to keep shooting his hellfire, but as soon as Pride descended the few steps into the aisle, he kicked both with a jutting of one foot and a swing of one wing, launching several pews into Dad's torso.

Dad tried to dodge, to slice his claws through the center of one, but his hellfire went rogue up toward the ceiling, nearly careening into me and making me tumble to the side.

The fire struck a beam supporting the steeple point, splintering it, but not utterly destroying the ceiling. Dad was good, protected himself, even as he went flying across the chapel from the pews he couldn't avoid, but he was clearly out of practice fighting anything other than the weeds in our backyard.

"Too long among mortals, Leviathan?" Pride taunted what I'd been thinking and swept my fire aside while I was watching Dad. He countered part of my beam's fire back into my own hands, forcing me to cease its propulsion as my skin burned.

Dad's tail erupted from beneath the pews, wrapping around Pride's middle and twisting as the rest of Dad came with it, tightening and tightening like a constrictor. Pride's sword and shield became trapped against his body with his arms pinned, and as Dad grappled him, he used his lower set of wings to cover Pride's face as if to suffocate him.

But Pride's bladed wings were still extended, and as they lacerated down and across Dad's tail, he was forced to release or be cut to ribbons. He sagged to the floor, at a loss and looking at me.

What should I do?

What should I *do*?

The portal was widening, not closing like the other tears. Marc had made it to the opening, attempting to pull himself up as he straddled the line between Hell and Earth, and turned back to shoot pitiful hellfire at the advancing army. He could do little else. He was too weak from how I'd drained him. How I'd doomed him.

“Avriel!”

I looked down at Dad's cry to see a violet line of hellfire incoming from a swing of Pride's sword, but it was too late to dodge.

The blast slammed me up and back into the same beam of wood my dad's hellfire had splintered, and me colliding with it made the cracks worse. As I clung to it to catch my bearings and clenched my teeth against the fire that had burned me, the wood was done for and started to split before I could right myself.

“Defeat me, and the veil falls faster than you can reform it.” Pride's voice was a hissing war cry now. “My army will swarm, and though your power might defeat them, not before they've torn the wings from your *whore*.”

I pushed from the breaking beam with a howl, tumbling haphazardly, but saw one way to correct my fall. The flags of the countries of the world were in reach, and I grabbed the closest one. I spun, end over end around the pole like a gymnast, and dislodged it on my dismount, propelling myself at Pride with the flagpole as my spear.

The army would reach the portal, reach Marc, in moments, and his hellfire attacks to keep them back were dwindling. I didn't even know if I believed him. Did I believe him? Whatever he'd planned, was he going to change his mind and stay, like my dad? Did he mean the words he'd said? Some of them? All of them? I didn't know. I couldn't know, couldn't be sure, but I knew I had to get him out of harm's way and find out for myself.

Dad lashed out his injured and bleeding tail to wrap around Pride's middle again, startling and holding the avatar immobile so he couldn't move wings or sword or shield fast enough

before I skewered through his armor like he'd skewered Mark. It met the resistance of metal, but I fueled the flagpole with so much hellfire, it melted through Pride's armor before it melted through the pole, until the avatar was properly impaled. That the flag I'd used had teal and green stripes seemed fitting, ablaze now with teal fire.

Pride laughed, even with shield fading and sword clattering to the chapel floor. He laughed and wrapped his claws around the melting flagpole. "Missed the heart. But they won't."

I darted my eyes to the portal. They were here. And I saw the last sparks of Marc's fire peter out, as he collapsed across the threshold, bleeding, not healing, and ripe to be culled.

The tinkling sound of metal brought my eyes down and everything stilled. The necklace from Eryn and Fry had fallen forward as if freed from a shirt that was no longer there. A symbol against demons, against Hell, like some of all I'd lost was still with me. It was as if part of my subconscious or the universe or maybe even... Mom looking out for me had brought it out of concealment.

I pulsed more fire into the flagpole, heating Pride's armor again too, until it melted like liquid and left Pride bare. He didn't look as smug when I tore the pendant from my neck and corrected my mistake by driving the pointy end of the Horadrim symbol right into Pride's heart.

I leapt. I didn't wait for Pride to burst into violet sparks with his death, though I felt when he did, because I summoned it all to follow me. I blasted a beam at the army threatening Marc's fallen body with claws and bladed weapons, and they cascaded backward in a wave of bodies.

Pride's life force was strong and pulsed around me, as I landed beside Marc and pulled him to me. I didn't take the energy, didn't absorb it, not any of it. Marc wasn't dead, but he was dying, too drained to heal, so I gave him every ounce of Pride's power to help.

He gasped when it filled him, maybe not even fully unconscious but roused now from the surge of the most

powerful of the avatars' energy. It was enough to heal the wound in his chest in seconds and returned some of the size and sharpness to his beauty. He looked like he almost didn't believe I'd saved him, but then he touched some of the burns from Pride's last blast at me.

“Shoulda dodged.”

I laughed. “I was distracted.”

“Rookie mistake.”

Roars reminded me there was an army and the whole of Hell on one side of us even if I'd blasted many of them back. The portal was shrinking. It should have been widening, but I could see that it was shrinking and starting to close in around us.

I yanked Marc upright and moved us into the chapel.

We were sucked back into Hell.

“What the—” My words cut off when I tried to cross again, and again, we were pulled back into Hell before I got us a few feet.

I flapped my wings with everything in me, and felt Marc add the propulsion of his, and finally, we made it through, far enough that whatever was happening as the portal to Hell closed couldn't grab us.

But it did grab my dad.

“Avriel!”

I leapt after him, trying to keep enough distance to avoid being sucked in too, with Marc at my back, as I tried to... I didn't know what, but I outstretched my arms, trying to use all the power I'd drained this past month to will the portal from closing.

Why was it closing? I wanted it to close, I did, but not if it took Dad with it.

I didn't want Hell. I wanted Dad. And Marc. And Eryn and Fry. Even stupid Brent. I wanted my life back, whatever that meant from here on out.

But the portal was still closing, Lucifer's army advancing again too, and Dad could barely keep himself at the portal's edge. He gripped its sides like he was being sucked out of a plane that's emergency door had flown off.

"I can't do it," I said, as all my efforts only seemed to amount in slowing the inevitable. "Why can't I do it?"

"Because ya didn't take everything," Marc said, hand closing over my shoulder with a tender squeeze. "Without all the avatars' energy, yer not really king. Yer not strong enough to reopen the veil that ya didn't let break."

"But if I take it all, you might..." I glanced at him, my arms shaking from using energy I couldn't even see and didn't know if it was having any effect.

Marc was so beautiful to me. Any version of him, shrunk or empowered, but especially like this, back to how he'd looked when he first appeared out of the shadows on my birthday and scared me so much, I'd almost ended all this before it began. Even then, I'd found him beautiful—the red hair swept up like the flame of a candle, the equally red eyes glowing from within a dark purplish face, and the tease of fangs in his smile. His wings, his claws, his markings, even the ones I'd caused that somehow hadn't made him turn from me, I loved all of it. I loved Marc. Because he believed in me.

And I believed him. He'd intended to corrupt and change and mold me into something I now wanted to reject, and all the while I'd corrupted and changed and molded him into something more human.

"I can't do it," I said again.

"Avi—"

"I can't choose. Please... please don't make me choose."

"I won't." Marc came up parallel to me. "I love you, Avi. I mean that."

He sprinted forward, right toward my dad and the closing veil.

I stood stunned, watching him grip my dad around the waist where his tail began, lurch himself around behind Dad into the vortex trying to suck everything in, and flap his wings to propel Dad forward, something even Dad's four wings hadn't been enough to manage with the increasing suction.

Dad launched to safety—and Marc got pulled in, landing at the army's feet.

“It might still be thin where ya—” but before he could finish whatever he'd meant to say, there was an awful, unfair pop, and the veil closed.

I hadn't meant that. That's not what I'd meant when I begged him not to make me choose. Dad was safe. Home.

But Marc was gone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hey. How are you doing?”

I looked up from my sketchpad. I was sitting in the Commons area by one of the fireplaces. Drawing outdoors wasn't an option, since the snow had gotten pretty thick since Thanksgiving. Not that we really celebrated. We had all the food but kept it frozen or uncombined into the usual dishes. I hadn't been up to eating any of it only a day after my destiny came and went.

And took Marc with it.

“Been better,” I answered honestly, hiding what I'd been working on as Eryn and Fry sat with me.

It had been seven days, a whole week since that night, and exactly four weeks since my birthday. For someone who'd never had a boyfriend before Marc, I'd sure packed love and loss into a short span of days.

I never knew losing something I'd barely had time to appreciate could hurt so much.

“Maaaaaarc!” I'd screamed after the portal closed, and it was just me and Dad left in the quiet, vandalized chapel.

He'd held my shoulders, held me in an embrace with snake tail coiled around me like a shield instead of the constricting weapon it had been against Pride, as I stood before the spot where the portal once was, unable to accept that I'd lost.

I'd won. But I'd lost.

“He doesn't have any power,” I'd sobbed. “Not enough. Not anymore. I took all his power. He can't be there alone,

Dad. There were so many of them.” And Lucifer, however weakened by losing his avatar like the others, would be so angry. They’d all be angry, and they knew Marc helped me. “There’ll be other breaches, right? Ways for him to come back?”

Dad had taken too long to answer, dropping my stomach even lower than the awful pit it had hollowed to. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. Not never, but maybe not for... decades, centuries, longer. I am so sorry, Avriel.” He’d wrapped me up tighter, and I’d wanted to be smothered, to not feel or see or experience anything while the guilt and grief washed over me.

If only I’d listened. If only I’d let Marc explain.

I’d shifted back to human, smothered indeed by my dad, an arch demon dragon, but he soon shifted with me. He let me sink to my knees and dropped down to hold me on the floor.

“I fucked it all up. He meant everything he said. He loved me, Dad. And I... I love him, too. That *fucking* asshole.” I’d sobbed for more minutes than I could count, and though Dad knew what it was like to lose the person he loved, he never tried to say it—*I know how you feel; it’ll be okay; it’ll get better*. He just let me cry.

It turned out I didn’t want to be king of Hell, or Earth, or both. I didn’t like that side of me that had almost killed Brent, that had considered for longer than a moment remaking the world in my image like had first terrified me when Marc offered it. No pity. No remorse. I didn’t want that, and he’d been the one to pull me back and remind me to be human.

I hadn’t been able to tell Eryn and Fry the truth. Eryn had blown up my phone with texts I hadn’t answered while talking with my dad before Marc showed up that night. After I saw them, after the chapel, I still couldn’t answer her, not until days later. Then it was to tell her and Fry that it was too complicated to explain but Marc was gone.

“He said you had a fight,” Eryn had broached on Monday morning, back from Thanksgiving break.

“We did. But I think it could have been okay if he’d stayed.”

I’d cried then too, and they’d stopped asking for details.

Yesterday, I told them about my mom. That she died in childbirth, and that’s why I hate my birthday—not that she’d hooked up with a demon and I was the failed Antichrist. They never asked what that had to do with Marc, just offered their sympathies. I knew Eryn had probably tried getting a hold of Marc, but his phone was likely in Hell with him. I kind of doubted it got reception there. When I’d tried calling once, it went straight to some operator error message.

Now, with a week gone and everything sort of numb, I was glad Eryn and Fry didn’t ask much of me, just tried to chat like normal and check if I wanted to get together for a video game marathon this weekend. They were good friends. The best. Marc had learned that too.

I’d found out that he’d talked Fry through some hardship concerning his parents splitting up that day when everything unraveled. I hadn’t known everything was unraveling for Fry too, and Marc, a born demon, had helped him through it. Marc was also partnered with Eryn on some big coaching project, something she loved and said she couldn’t imagine finishing without him. I couldn’t imagine finishing the year or the school year or making plans for what to do afterward without Marc either.

I’d wanted to be a statistic, like Eryn and Fry were destined to be. Together forever if we just could have made it through graduation.

“Maybe the weekend after,” I said about playing video games.

They didn’t push, and soon, the chimes for next class were going off, and they reluctantly left me alone. I was supposed to be going to Ethics. I wasn’t sure if I could do that today. I was thinking I might skip and keep working on my drawing, which I looked at again now that Eryn and Fry weren’t around to see it and pity me that much more.

It was of Marc, the human version, because I already had one of Marc the demon, but this was part of him too. Just like I'd always be part demon, and maybe always worry about falling prey to that darker nature, Marc had become more human. And was probably being tortured because of how it had weakened him. How *I'd* weakened him.

I clenched my eyes shut to stay the fall of fresh tears and pulled my Horadrim necklace from out of my shirt—salvaged, cleaned, and on a new chain. I didn't want to think so negatively, but there was no way to know if Marc was alive. When I looked up, I saw Brent standing in one of the Commons entryways, parting with his girlfriend with a sweet kiss. They'd probably be a statistic too.

He spotted me after she walked away. He'd been avoiding me again, but this time, he started to come over. I covered my new sketch of Marc, but not quickly enough before Brent saw it.

“Hey,” he said, sitting in an armchair, not on the sofa next to me like Eryn and Fry. “I've been, um... trying to figure out the best way to apologize, and to say thanks for saving my life again, but everything I come up with seems thoroughly inadequate.”

I met his gaze. He was too afraid of me to not be genuine and squirmed as he sat there.

“I was a dick,” he continued. “*Am* a dick. But I did tell my frat brothers that I work at the plant.”

I looked around, wondering if I could spot any, but none were in view. I knew I'd seen Brent with his frat brothers the past few days, not weirdly estranged or anything. “They didn't care, did they?”

“Nope.” He popped the P.

“I hate you.”

“Fair.” Brent chuckled. I hadn't said it with any real malice. “A few months from now, none of who we were is going to matter anyway.”

“I guess you’re right.” It wasn’t an “I forgive you,” but I didn’t think that’s what Brent was after.

He lingered, like he had more to say, and when he did, he leaned closer to speak it as quietly as he could. “I didn’t hallucinate any of what I saw in CAS house or in that parking lot, did I?”

I answered quietly too. “What answer do you want?”

He pulled back and laughed again, uncomfortably, still scared of me probably, but choosing to not let the fear control him. “I don’t know.” Then he added, “It was really hot when your beau ducked under that table in the Toadstool though. Mortifying, but hot.”

“Pretty much sums him up.” I smiled but lost the expression almost as soon as I formed it. Brent noticed and tapped the top of my closed sketchpad, having already seen what I’d covered up.

“Haven’t seen him in a while. Everything okay? Or did he do something to get on thin ice with you?”

If I hadn’t told Eryn and Fry the truth, even if Brent was the only person who’d seen the real me, I wasn’t about to tell him. I opened my mouth to give the same excuses I’d given my friends, only for Brent’s words to echo in my mind.

Echo... in Marc’s voice.

Thin. That’s what he’d started to say before the portal closed. It might still be thin where you... where *I* because he was talking about me.

The veil? But where I what? Thin where I... where I...

“Where I first changed.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” I grabbed my sketchpad, not bothering to shove it into my backpack, as I raced from the Commons room, pausing just long enough to yell back, “Gotta go! I owe you one!”

Because if I had any chance of getting Marc back, I now realized there was only one place to look.



“AVRIEL, even if you’re right that this was what Marc meant —”

“I have to try, Dad. I have to try.”

We were behind Ole’s in broad daylight, but the alley was hidden enough that I wasn’t worried about being seen. I’d even offered to bring the afternoon trash out for the person on shift, so there wasn’t any risk of them appearing while we did this.

This wasn’t only where I’d first changed into the start of my true self and met the real Marc, but where he’d found a thin spot in the veil to begin with and crossed over. He knew where it was. He knew how to find it.

“Marc told me he could detect weak points in the veil before coming to Earth. That was his job. And it might still be thin enough here, at the start of everything instead of the end like in the chapel. If he’s alive, he’d be able to find his way here. I think that’s what he was trying to tell me before the veil closed.”

Dad had been home, awake, with no shift until later, when I went to retrieve him for his help. I didn’t know what to expect, but I didn’t want to do this alone. I didn’t know exactly where Marc had come through, but I remembered the spot where my wings and horns had burst out of me, and I’d shredded my work shirt.

I stepped up to it, raising a hand to test if it was thin. Dad did the same, opposite me.

“It does feel fragile here,” he said.

I could feel it too, but not as thin as before a tear. Maybe days ago, after things first ended, it would have been, but I

hadn't understood or known what to do. It had been a week, and Marc might have been waiting this whole time, hoping I'd figure things out.

"It's solidifying like the rest." Dad dropped his hand. "I'm sorry."

"No. It's still thin."

"For a possession, yes, but not flesh and blood."

"I don't accept that." I kept my palm outward, feeling through that thinness like I'd been able to detect tears ever since the first. I hadn't been strong enough to keep the veil open without all six of the avatars' energies, but I still had so much power. It had to be enough to weaken the damn thing just a little, just enough, to pull one demon through. "If he's there, I can get him."

I started to pour my energy into that thought, as much as I had when trying to keep the entirety of the veil from collapsing in the chapel. This was easier, I told myself. This was nothing. This was a remnant, an echo of something far enough from that crescendo that I could still hear the faint thrum of something else echoing too.

Marc.

Please, let it be Marc.

Dad lifted his hand again, not questioning me. The veil *was* solidifying, but there was something here. I could feel it, right past the brink, waiting.

I let my wings unfurl, let my body change to better fuel my power, and Dad copied me in that too. More and more we fought to break open the weakened veil until, at last, a fissure formed, like a bright red lightning bolt crackling into existence.

I knew it was a risk, but I didn't pause to think. I shoved my hand through that sliver of an opening, felt another hand with the faint prick of claws wrap around my wrist, and I pulled with everything I had.

The pop hurt my ears and a flash of red light put spots in my vision, as I toppled backward from the force of my pull. The fissure sealed, hardening completely like an impenetrable wall, but before it closed off all access to Hell for maybe centuries to come, someone had landed on top of me.

“Hello, love,” Marc said, weak and exhausted looking and even a little bloody, but alive. Home. “Maybe don’t cut it so close next time, eh?”

I couldn’t laugh, cry, or even shout for joy. There was only one thing I could do.

I kissed him.



“SO, DO YA LIKE IT?” Marc asked, hot and breathy against my ear.

I moaned as he seared his cock inside me, but the imp wasn’t talking about the slow slide of morning sex. “Could use some decorating.”

There hadn’t been any reason for Marc to keep the map of Vale up on his apartment bedroom wall with the little pins stuck in, signifying the places where we’d fended off the apocalypse. It was a sparse and simple flat, with very little personality, as if demon Marc hadn’t wanted to admit how much the newly fostered human side of him might want to stay.

He was ready to admit that now, and his hand around my waist to hold me while he fucked me admitted it plenty, since we’d said, almost like a game between us, that we’d try to keep our human appearances for us long as we could.

His nails were blunt as they dug into my skin on his first sharp backstroke.

A growl stirred in me with want of fangs, claws, and wings to sprout, causing a tingle and itch beneath my skin like that

day when I first blossomed.

“Wanna bring anything over here, love, feel free,” Marc said, as if continuing a normal, non-mid-coitus conversation. “Assuming Pops doesn’t mind, o’ course.”

I expected Marc to buck his hips with a harsher contrast to the easy dialogue, but he kept his slide in and out of me agonizingly slow.

My fangs sprang free over my bottom lip.

“M-maybe a few things, but I—*ohhhhhh!*” I moaned without being able to hold it back.

Marc kept the pace slow, nosing my neck, broad chest flush against my back that was made itchier from the contact, begging for me to loose my wings. Above the line of my crease too, my tail longed for freedom, and I pushed my hips into Marc’s thrusts to stay the aggravation.

It *was* a game, holding off arousal and climax and sanity, and I was losing to the slick heat of his cock driving inside me with the speed of someone floating down a lazy river.

He must have known—that he was torturing me, that I was close to letting the demon in me burst out of my shell—because the hand on my hip slid to the base of my cock and squeezed as if my knot had formed.

“*Fuck.*” I clutched his wrist for purchase.

“I feel yer claaaaws,” he teased.

“Can’t help it.”

“Me neither.” Marc snapped his teeth at my ear, and I felt the scrape of his fangs. “I lose all control ’round ya... just like you do with me. Ya want my ridges, don’t ya?” He made me take him so slowly, as his grasp on my cock grew prickly from his claws unsheathing like mine.

“Maybe...”

He chuckled. “Let the beast free, and I’ll give ’em to ya, then swallow yer knot before I let ya come.”

My wings erupted like a premature spurt, almost pushing Marc off the bed, and he threw his head back with another laugh. My knot was there now, ripe in his hand, and I thrust into its squeeze, taking any friction I could wrangle. “Say stuff like that... and I’ll come already.”

“Not yet. Gotta let ya feel... every... groove of me.”

The human cock that had last pulled out of me was a ridged one when it slid back in, punctuated by each... and every... word.

Marc gripped both sides of my hips to keep fucking me but stopped touching me everywhere else.

“M-Marc...”

“Said ya couldn’t come yet.”

I whined pitifully.

“Good boy, Avi.”

That wasn’t helping.

My tail and horns had sprouted too, and with us on our sides, the latter wasn’t easy to lay on, but they helped support that I was boneless, feverish from Marc’s ridges tenderizing my hole like a piece of meat he planned to devour. My knot wanted him, wanted something to bury itself in, and I pictured Marc’s hole and mouth with equal fervor to fill them.

Then it hit me.

“Do you think my knot will go away? Since I gave you Pride’s power?”

“Better not, or I’m leaving yer ass.”

I elbowed him sharply. Even there, I could feel his ridges, the grooves that made up his demon body, formed over his human contours, with dark bronze skin now a grayish purple.

“Yer always a king to me, Avi,” Marc amended, ever teasing, but always eventually sweet, “even the human bits. Especially those. But also the knot,” he whispered.

I laughed. I wanted to come. Marc's pillow talk, his impish sincerity, his fucking ridges opening me with slower and slower thrusts that still seemed to go deeper inside me with each skewer—it inflamed me. And he still wasn't touching me anywhere but through the vise-like hold on my hips. I needed *friction*.

He'd notice my hands, so out of confinement between our bodies, I slithered the coil of my tail. Mine was thicker than Marc's but could still curl. As strong as the sturdiest of my armor, the top of my tail was corrugated with scales, but the interior had enough softness that I could wrap the thinner, tenderer end that faded from black to teal right below my knot and—

“Naughty, naughty. Can't have that.” He pried off my tail before I'd give a single squeeze.

“*Marc...*”

“I'll play nice. But we're gonna play with our tails differently, yeah?”

“Yeah?”

Then I felt it, the spade of Marc's tail as it teased the stretch of my hammered hole, just like I'd once done to him.

Fuck, yes.



IT WAS good to be home.

How'd I evade Lucifer's army of eldritch angels, ya might ask? Avi had gifted me enough energy to hold any illusion easily, and I made myself invisible to escape. Wouldn't have worked if Lucifer still had his power. He would have seen me straight away and sent a bolt of vibrant hellfire to torch me in my tracks. But with his avatar toast, I slipped off into the dark undetected.

Didn't mean I wasn't hunted, and by more than Lucifer's tribe. My illusions wouldn't fool my own, and I knew they were after me too, meaning all I could do was lie low, sneak my way to the spot in Hell where I'd first crossed over and witnessed Avi's ascension to the start of his greatness, and wait for my darling demonling to save me.

Hopeless romantic now, ain't I?

I kinda liked it.

I kinda loved it.

I also loved Avi's thick knot and had missed it dearly.

Taking it in hand once more, I circled Avi's hole with the tip of my tail, while urging him to use his tail on me.

"I want that knot, love, just like you want my ridges. Pave the way for round two. Open me up while I fuck ya."

Avi's tail, like so much of him, was tougher and thicker and all around more impressive as he'd grown into his power. I knew it could penetrate deep and gave over to its pressure when it pierced me.

"Ah!" I moaned to let him know how much I liked the insistent twirl and thrust of it inside me—though not the increase in tempo he tried to cultivate.

"It's not a race. Enjoy our reunion." I clenched around the tail's tip.

"Y-you've been back for a week."

"Is a week all it takes to forget missing me?"

He huffed but leaned his head on my shoulder. "I'll never forget missing you... and I never want to know that feeling again."

"Ya won't. But then I'm in charge like ya promised, and I want to go *slow*."

Avi groaned as my cock's next backstroke was accompanied by my tail entering alongside it. We were demons, and Avi had a darkness that could rival my own, but neither wanted that part to take over. I still loved that it was

part of him at all, and I skirted the edge of danger every time we shagged. But it was loving him that made the thrill different, that made me want to ensure that taunting the beast never pushed things too far.

I didn't doubt Avi agreed when, while fucking him with cock and tail both, and him twisting his tail inside me, he gently reached back to touch the scars he'd left on my hips. Reminders for us both of which lines we never wanted to cross again.

"I'm gonna try something."

"Oh?" I started to thrust faster, knowing my time in the lead was short.

"You'll like it." Avi arched his neck around, careful with his horns, and met his mouth to mine.

My eyes sprang wide rather than close as he kissed me—and transferred what felt like the entirety of the remaining avatars' powers to join that of Pride's that had saved my life. It awakened me like a shot of adrenaline, feeling them return where their ache had honestly left a hollowness that I didn't think possible to fill again.

Sloth, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, and Wrath all mingled with Pride at my core, becoming what might have been virtues instead of sins for how gloriously complete they made me feel. I could never be what Avi had the potential for because of what was missing, what existed only in our kiss and the presence of my love beside me.

Envy, not to be consumed, but shared in the connection of our bodies.

No. *Kindness*, the opposite of the sin, because Avi was love, and he'd given me a great gift to prove it, a power that made every part of me feel larger than ever before.

And formed a thick, pulsing knot at the base of my cock that I fucked into him and felt like I came already from how tightly he squeezed around my girth.

Yes!

I rocked and moaned and bit into Avi's shoulder, then harder when he thrust back, and I had to pull out my tail to avoid it getting crushed.

“Oh fuck... oh *yes!*” His echoing moans were just as wrecked.

“Told ya... knots... were a godsend.”

“*Ohhhhhh...!*”

I rocked and rocked, until I knew the next clench of Avi—

“Ah!” I came, over and over with hot stripes to coat his insides, and felt my knot pulse several times more before it settled. Even resting inside Avi's glorious heat, I wasn't stuck, my knot less bulbous than his and able to dislodge whenever we wanted.

When he craned his neck again, I realized his fifth, central horn had been lost after giving me that energy. He kissed me, taking it back for himself, and as he drank the energy down, the horn regrew with a sweeping eruption.

I'd forgotten his tail was stretching me until it left, but thankful for its work when Avi flipped me on the bed, wings outstretched beneath me, and legs spread in eagerness of what came next. I'd lost my knot, my largeness, but not my desire, as Avi speared me like I'd speared him, and instant replay sprung my cock anew.

He'd taken everything he'd given me but left me with *Pride*. He didn't want it. Not only to avoid hurting me, but to keep from becoming his final form that might turn him into something he didn't want to be.

What he did want... was me.

“Avi!” I moaned, as he railed me, and his wings swept backward with a great gust of air.

I was coming again already, somehow, splendidly, from the sheer size and depth and mind-altering pressure of his knot, until I was beaten. Me, lust demon superb, was defeated by the best little death of my life.

Avi growled as he pumped and pumped, and finally spilled inside me, his knot growing larger as he did, as if finding even more spunk to enlarge it with that he could endlessly unleash in me. He could if he wanted to. I'd welcome it until I was oozing and ask for more and more.

With his knot, we were trapped, locked together, and panting. Avi's fifth horn prevented the press of our foreheads but not a tilted angle for a kiss. Then, when he'd softened enough to pull out, eliciting a low grunt from me, he shifted up my body to squeeze that much more of his seed across my lips, until every drop left him.

I lapped at some with a swirl of my tongue, but left the rest, knowing Avi would bend to kiss me again. When he did, I nipped at his lips before our mouths connected, drawing the smallest bubble of blood, and we kissed through the mix of blood and come together.

Avi gave some of the energy back to me, like he might want another round, and I'd be all for it if I could move, but he didn't pass everything. The avatars' energies seemed to mix, no discernable differences, yet I could tell, even with Pride mixing in too, that what I was left with when our lips parted was almost perfectly half. Nothing physical changed with that balance, but I could feel it, the trust Avi had in me to let me share all that he was, all that his destiny had led him to take, even if once, I'd stolen so much of it from him.

"I love you, Marc," he said, though I wouldn't have needed the words to feel them after that act of forgiveness.

"I love you, Avi," I echoed.

We kissed, and the energy remained a balance.

For now. I'd definitely want to test having that knot again.

Eventually, we changed human, cleaned up, and while Avi started to search for his clothes, I basked in the lazy sprawl of morning, still on the bed.

"What was that *but* before?" I asked. "About moving stuff here?"

“Oh, just... I kind of want to stay home more until the school year’s over. Spending time with Dad, getting to know the real him, and him the new me, I think it’s important.”

“I get that.” Part of me wanted to be selfish and keep Avi all to myself, but I guess it was some of my good side shining through that I honestly didn’t mind sharing him. “I’ll just have to satisfy myself with frequent fucking—and fondly remembering said fucking when in my bed alone.” I arched my naked hips and circled a finger across the bed sheets.

Avi snorted and shook his head, half dressed in undies and a T-shirt, as he stood, and went to his backpack against the wall.

He’d returned to wearing real clothing again, with the occasional manifestation of something special. He thought it might help him keep what he worried was a precarious balance. Maybe it was, but I was here to make sure he never lost himself again.

“I might have something for your walls as a consolation prize.” Avi pulled out his sketchpad, and when he came to sit on the bed again and showed it to me, inside the front cover were two laminated prints.

The ones of us, demonic and beautiful.

“Thank you,” I said, but as I took them, I couldn’t resist lifting the next page and the next to peek through his drawings. He let me, looking too as I paged through the book.

He’d been busy. There were new drawings, some conceptual, some mimicking real life with his Giger-like otherworldly style. A few I knew to be commissions—*paid*—since he had the time now, no longer having to worry about tuition or saving the world from demonic avatars. His dreams were back to their original goal, not world domination, but a life doing what he loved.

He almost stopped me when I reached near the end of the sketchpad, but that spurred me to look further, because I’d gotten to blank pages, so why stop me now? Hidden in the

back, on the very last page, was another drawing of me, this one entirely human.

“Might need a print of this too,” I said, when he glanced away as if embarrassed.

“That can be arranged.” He returned my stare then with a tender smile.

“Meanwhile, I think I’m gonna put these two on the ceiling.” I snatched up the prints.

“Ceiling?”

I laid back and gestured above me. “Purely for masturbation purposes.”

Avi smacked my knee, but then climbed up the bed to steal another kiss. “Come on. Dad expects us for breakfast. Then we have classes to get to.”

Classes and a normal life I never dreamed I’d love as much as I loved the demonling atop me. *Loved*, because I did, and there was no going back, and I wouldn’t want to if I could.



NATHAN, or rather, Leviathan—no, Nathan, since that’s who he’d chosen to be—was indeed waiting for me and Avi with breakfast ready. Thinking of him as just Nathan Dermot made it easier to not piss my pants in his presence.

He hadn’t been working the night shift anymore, so grabbing meals and spending more time together had become significantly easier. Whether he’d used any demonic influence to accomplish that, he didn’t say. Sometimes, I was invited to join. Sometimes, they spent time alone, and I was fine with that. I was fine with anything that kept me on Nathan’s good side.

Never gave me a shovel talk. No point, I s’posed, since Avi could disembowel me plenty on his own. But no talk of

disembowelment at the breakfast table. We ate. Had coffee. Talked about regular, human things, and I could almost imagine I'd never spent the start of my life in Hell.

“See you two for dinner?” Nathan said, confirming our Wednesday night plans for an enchilada bake chock-full of richness and calories that I was very much looking forward to. “And you,” he added with a pointed look that had become commonplace in our partings, “keep behaving.”

“Wouldn't dream of otherwise.” I bowed my head. Then, quietly to Avi on the way out, “Might misbehave in some ways though.”

He laughed and gently elbowed me.

We walked up the hill to campus, since even with it well into winter now and snow on the ground, it felt invigorating to us demonic sorts rather than too bracing to brave the weather. Though Avi wore his beanie from Gray Friday Sales in the fitting colors of the gay men's pride flag.

“Yer really gonna keep making me go to Ethics, eh?”

“You're a college student now, same as me. And my boyfriend.” Avi took my hand.

I kissed the back of his. “Guess I am. Boyfriend to the sexy son of the arch demon Leviathan, at the ready to protect me.”

“Yep,” he said without denying which of us was the bloke in distress.

I didn't mind one bit being saved by my partner.

Eryn and Fry met us outside one of the buildings at the top of the hill, which started with the library and connected to the Commons. We had at least a few paces indoors before we'd need to part ways for our first class.

Eryn and I had Coaching, where I had some catching up to do, but not much, and she'd carried on fine in my absence. I might actually consider a career in Human Resources, 'cause wouldn't that be a hoot?

I spotted Brent along the way, walking hand-in-hand with his girlfriend. Bloke even passed me a nod. Bet he wondered what my demon dick looked like. But Avi said to play nice, so I waved.

The veil wouldn't stay solid forever. Another apocalypse might come 'round someday, but if and when it did, I knew we'd be ready.

"Good having you back, man," Fry said when it was his turn to diverge.

"Sure is!" Eryn launched herself from Fry's arm to mine. "And we're not letting you go, even if you get sick of us. Doubt you'd ever get sick of Avi though."

"Too bad if he gets sick o' me," I said. "He's not gettin' rid of me till at least graduation." I leaned down to kiss him.

Avi wore the strangest look when I pulled up.

"What?"

"Nothing! Just thinking about statistics." He grinned.

Which I thought odd given that wasn't one of his classes.

Then Avi was off too, but I'd see him soon in Ethics.

And after that.

And after *that*.

For as long as he'd have me.



I TOLD you we'd get to the good stuff, because that was how I, most powerful of all cambions, failed Antichrist, and son of the arch demon Leviathan—who did not kick-start the apocalypse—fell in love with an imp.



AND THAT WAS HOW I, my lovelies, most beautiful and clever of all lust demons, imp or otherwise, let the son of the arch demon love me and fell in love with him right back.

POSSESSIVE LOVE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Meuwissen is a queer author with a primary focus on M/M romance, including LGBTQ+ Fantasy #1 Best Seller, *Coming Up for Air*, LGBTQ+ Horror #1 Best Seller and #1 New Release, *A Delicious Descent*, Fantasy Erotica #1 New Release, *Last Courtesan of Olympus*, and many others through various publishers. She lives in Minnesota with her husband, John, and their cat, Helga, and can be found at linktr.ee/amandameuwissen.

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